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April Yang March 26, 2014

Method to the Madness:

Boundaries, Binaries, and Burdens in the Literature of Poe and the American Gothic

by

April Yang

Laura Otis
Adviser

Department of English

_____

Laura Otis

Adviser

_____

Elena Conis

Committee Member

_____

Erin Suzuki

Committee Member

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By April Yang

Though much of the criticism of Edgar Allan Poe fixates on his own tenuous grasp on his sanity, we would be reducing a rich, fruitful body of literature to pedestrian psychoanalysis to neglect Poe's role as an orator for early 19th century American society. The concerns he expresses in his short stories convey themes of imprisonment, the omnipresent fear of death, boundaries and separation, and the binary between isolation and intimacy – themes that, though exceedingly difficult to confront, underlie our common history and humanity. Finally, Poe gives the madman, the outcast, and the victim of society a voice in his narratives and, in doing so, he compels us to realize that only by seeing the world from the vantage of the marginalized can we seek to repair and reinforce society against its inherent evils and uncontrollable external threats.

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Introduction

When I first conceived of this project, I had grand plans: I ambitiously envisioned a 100-page masterpiece with four chapters, drawing from the works of three canonical giants – Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman – fearlessly tackling and gracefully demystifying questions about truth, the construction of narratives, history, human nature, and the intersections of these nebulous themes. Suffice it to say, my project has shifted and evolved drastically in its structure, content, and direction. In its many intermediate stages of evolution, this thesis has challenged my resolve, tested my work ethic, reignited my passion for literature, and, most importantly and most obviously, it has forced me to think deeply, critically, and constantly. I have lost count of the number of stories and articles I have read this year but I thought perhaps this introduction would finally present me with the opportunity to write a story, an explanation, of my own. This is the story of how my thesis came to be, from conceptualization to completion.

During this whole process, I struggled most agonizingly with narrowing the scope of my project and focusing the breadth of the questions I sought to answer. Originally, heavily influenced by my background in Global Health and my specific interest in mental illness, I planned to center all my claims and discussions around the umbrella concept of madness in its many forms. I wanted to offer a holistic understanding of madness and its role in American Gothic literature – its representation and stigmatization, its sufferers, its various manifestations, its treatment in society, and its consequences. After I began my research, however, I realized that writing about madness as a theme in the American Gothic would be like digging in an excavation site; but I wanted to break new ground. So I did what any other fumbling humanities scholar

would do in times of doubt – I returned to my primary texts, short stories by each of my three authors. After combing through the stories and mining the heart of my curiosity, I realized that what I originally thought was a personal interest in the curious mental states of the stories' characters was actually the culmination of a number of other, more provocative concerns.

Over time, I recognized that I had an affinity for the themes of imprisonment – which I subdivided into the categories of physical, mental, social, and circumstantial forms of imprisonment, fear of death, boundaries and separation, and the binary between isolation and intimacy; madness is, in my newly directed approach, the result of a person's inability to make peace with one, or some, or all of these elements. It astonishes me that I can now express the core interests of my project in one (albeit lengthy) sentence whereas, at one point, I could only conceive of them as a tangled web of intersecting ideas but no clear, distinct strands of thought. Now I wish I could momentarily harness the ability to travel back in time to eight months ago and tell myself that I was right to envision my project as a web; webs are not random messes. Every strand and every point of connection in a web is necessary to its construction and its retention of structure, though it may look flimsy and disorderly in its intermediate stages. Once I oriented myself thematically in my texts, I conceded that I could not realistically write in depth about the emergence of all of those themes in each of the short stories that piqued my initial interest; had I endeavored to cover all of my primary texts and had I more than one academic year's time, I would have collected enough material for a dissertation. As every writer must suffer him or herself to do time and time again, I had to make some difficult sacrifices.

As I developed a more concrete conception of what I expected of my final product, I reluctantly forfeited what I then thought were significant components of my original plan, namely the inclusion of works by Hawthorne and Gilman. As a long-time admirer of

Hawthorne's complex-compound sentences and shrewd characterization, I was thrilled to find, in my preliminary research, common threads between his dark romanticist literary tropes and Poe's, specifically in the short stories "Rappaccini's Daughter," "The Birthmark," and "Young Goodman Brown." Likewise, when I toyed with the idea of writing a chapter about the Female Gothic, I found perfection in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the physical and mental entrapment of her protagonist in the domestic space. Both of these writers delve daringly into the themes of isolation, the perversion of love and intimacy, problematized and problematic boundaries, the denial and misrepresentation of truth, and manifestations of madness. For my purposes, I could not have identified a more compatible group of authors. Ultimately, however, I made the decision to part ways with Hawthorne and Gilman so that I could wholly commit to and do justice to the inspiration that first ignited my desire to write a thesis: my love of Poe.

My steadfast decision to write about Poe's literature, particularly his short stories, stems from having grown up around the University of Virginia – Poe's alma mater, though he dropped out after only a year. I must have visited his dormitory room at least five times either on school field trips or simply because I happened to be in that part of the campus. For whatever reason, I found myself endlessly fascinated by this troubled, lonely artist who dreamt up worlds of darkness, anguish, and complexity, worlds I could never have fully wrapped my head around at that age, worlds that I have spent these past eight months attempting to dissect and understand. To be honest, even after eight months of meticulous scrutiny, I still feel as I did at age twelve, peering through the glass door of room number thirteen on the West Range, trying to make sense of Poe the poet, the gambler, the cadet, the critic, the alcoholic, the orphan, the romantic, the lunatic, struggling to reconcile how one man could embody so many different identities in only forty years of life. Though complete understanding of Poe as a person still eludes me, I find

beauty in the parallelism between his fractured identity and the multi-dimensionality of his stories, and in the way that every reader can find something different and compelling in his writing. What I found in his writing was a kindred soul – someone who breathed narrative life into my own deepest fears and reservations about death, love, solitude, and powerlessness. His fears are my fears and the fears of the American people in his time; they are the universal, transcendent fears girdling our humanity. In short, Poe's writing enthralls me and studying his literature has allowed me to access a deeper understanding of him, of American society in the mid-19th century, and, most surprisingly, of myself.

When I decided against focusing my questions on Poe's characters' descents into madness, I realized I could tap into a deeper well of information and analysis by probing into the reasons why Poe characterizes his narrators and secondary characters, most of whom we are meant to trust or empathize with, as mentally disturbed. In other words, I was not necessarily interested in writing about the madness itself; I wanted to understand why Poe chose to write his narratives through the distorting lens of madness. As my favorite English professors have always advised, I directed my focus to the *why* and *how* instead of the *what,* to the implicit instead of the explicit. I began with a solid preliminary idea of why Poe wove madness into his characterization: even if it was not Poe's intention for us to trust his narrators, he urges us to, at least initially, view them as normal people forced under abnormal circumstances that then cause them to go mad and commit acts of violence or negligence. Poe thereby reinforces the equation of madness to moral depravity, a notion that was quickly adopted into and preserved through social stigma. Following this cascade of ideas, I formulated a series of guiding questions that would serve as the foundation of my discussion of madness: If Poe's characters do represent ordinary, unremarkable people, does their madness imply that everyone has the potential to go

mad? If everyone has the potential to go mad, does everyone also inherently have a propensity for evil? What internal and external stressors cause Poe's characters to go mad? These inquiries became the launching points for my other major premises and remain rooted at the heart of my investigation of and passion for Poe's short stories.

Even by the end of my junior year, I already knew that my thesis would involve a deconstruction of some binary because, as a reader, I am naturally drawn to dichotomous relationships between concepts. More specifically, my interests pertain to the idea that two dichotomous concepts must, by definition, negate and directly counter each other and yet one cannot exist or be defined without the other. After I settled on which short stories I would explicate – "The Black Cat," "The Masque of the Red Death," and "The Fall of the House of Usher" – I observed that at least one main character in each of the stories, if not the narrator himself, experiences some form or degree of isolation from his alleged companions or from society. In "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," the main characters consciously seclude themselves in their estates from the rest of society, though their high social class naturally isolates them as well. In "The Black Cat," the narrator perceives a chasm between himself and other people because he holds that humans are inherently disloyal and selfish. Though there can be no doubt that Poe intentionally portrays these characters as recluses, I have learned the value of constantly questioning the nature of what we accept to be fact in terms of the sociocultural or personal criteria we use to judge characters and situations. Outside of Poe's mastery of pointed characterization, why is it that we can immediately, instinctively identify his characters as loners? Because we know that humans are innately social creatures and, being grounded in the cultural and social conventions of our society, we expect that any "normal" person's life in part entails forming interpersonal, meaningful, and substantial

relationships with others. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we all recognize the dichotomy that exists between isolation and intimacy; we favor and endorse intimacy over isolation; we accordingly stigmatize and vilify hermits as being abnormal and thus suspicious.

Although Poe compels us to confront our own prejudices and preconceptions about those who exist on the outskirts of society, he also problematizes our ingrained preference for intimacy. Though he does not explicitly discourage us from pursuing relationships in life, he gives us reasons to fear, or at least exercise discretion in, matters of intimacy because intimacy necessitates vulnerability. In "The Masque of the Red Death," perhaps Prospero might have survived the epidemic if he had never opened his castle doors to any guests. Similarly, perhaps the narrator of "The Black Cat" would not have committed his heinous murders if he had not opened himself to human connection in his early life, only to be disappointed and embittered; perhaps the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" might have retained his sanity and spared himself from a traumatic experience if he had not traveled to meet the needs of his estranged but once dear childhood friend. Though we cannot reduce these stories to didactic tales that seek to deter us from pursuing interpersonal connections, we also cannot deny that Poe's stories exhibit men who meet their downfalls and ruinations because they sought the company of others. In attempting to reconcile our simultaneous desire for and fear of intimacy and our aversion to isolation, I began to consider the dichotomy from a theoretical perspective. What exactly qualifies as intimacy? Is it to know a person and allow him or her to know you? Is it to trust someone? Does intimacy exist in degrees on a spectrum or is it an all-or-nothing concept? This last question in particular caught my attention due to its applicability to my examination of dichotomies. Though dichotomies sometimes indicate that only one of the two elements can exist at a time because the stronger overtakes the weaker, I drew inspiration from the idea of the two

elements residing on opposite ends of a spectrum with infinite intermediary options. The critical difference between these two theories about the nature of dichotomous relationships is that the theory that depends on the exclusivity of the two elements erects an impermeable boundary between them – separation for the sake of clarity and simplicity. Conversely, the theory that suggests the existence of a continuous spectrum between the two opposing elements implies fluidity, an acceptance of all possibilities, a freedom unrestricted by boundaries. Thus, another of my major themes surfaced: the formation, traversing, and dissolution of boundaries between people, ideas, and spaces.

My mission to identify and distinguish the roles of boundaries in Poe's short stories quickly led me to another of my project's central themes – the theme of imprisonment. This theme bridged the disconnect between my discussions of isolation and boundaries because most of the boundaries I noticed in the texts either fix characters in their current situations, thereby imprisoning them, or banish them to some periphery – in either case, these characters experience some degree of isolation which then directly causes or contributes significantly to their descent into madness. To further complicate the idea of imprisonment as a cause of madness in Poe's characters, I conceived of the aforementioned categories of physical, mental, social, and circumstantial imprisonment, distinctions that became essential to my arguments. I am partial to my investigations of mental imprisonment because previously, I had never really conceptualized the multitude of ways in which we internally limit and restrain ourselves. One of the most common forms of mental imprisonment in Poe's stories is the ubiquitous fear of death. Poe expresses this particular fear in his inclusion of various plot developments such as premature burials in both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Black Cat," Prince Prospero's brazen attempt and ultimate failure to evade death in "The Masque of the Red Death," and Roderick

Usher's early premonition that he will die of his mysterious malady. Though this fear of death comes to the forefront of each of his stories in turn, Poe raises the possibility, through his harrowing, macabre depictions of wayward souls, that there are forms of earthly existence that far exceed death in morbidity and grotesqueness – lives defined by boundaries, forced into imprisonments, led in isolation, plagued by madness. Before I knew it, my thesis had come full circle thematically; all the loose ends finally tied, my web taking on a discernible shape and strength of its own at long last.

As a critic, I cannot read a text without considering the historical circumstances surrounding and influencing the author's motives and narrative decisions though I do not necessarily identify most with the theories of New Historicism. An integral part of my preliminary research involved gaining a better understanding of what was happening in America at the time Poe wrote these three short stories. He first published "The Fall of the House of Usher" in 1839 in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, "The Masque of the Red Death" in 1842 in *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, and "The Black Cat" in 1843 in the *Saturday Evening Post*. He began his career as a professional writer in 1832 when the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier* published "Metzengerstein" and four of his other stories (Kennedy xxxiii-xxxiv). Given these points of chronological situation, I tried to discern what major events occurred in America in the 1830s and early 1840s that may have either impacted or provided explanation for some of the concerns Poe expresses in his writing.

The 1830s in America were largely characterized by the rise of both slavery and abolition, the beginning of westward expansion via the Oregon Trail, and the forced relocation, ethnic cleansing, and deaths of thousands of Native Americans from the southeast on the Trail of Tears. With regard to the economy, widespread bank failures, the decrease of profits, prices, and

wages, and a spike in unemployment led to the Panic of 1837, setting off a major recession that lasted until the mid-1840s. The Panic was attributed in part to restrictive lending policies in Great Britain, perpetuating tension from the Revolutionary War (Timberlake 514). The virginal American government struggled to flourish amidst various power struggles between leading politicians. In 1833, President Andrew Jackson urged Congress to pass the "Force Bill," which expanded presidential powers; one of the eight prominent sections of the bill "authorizes the President to use whatever force necessary to suppress insurrections and to cause the said laws or process to be duly executed" ("Force Bill"). The first attempt to assassinate an active president of the United States occurred in 1835 when Richard Lawrence, an unemployed housepainter who blamed Jackson for the loss of his job, shot twice at the president, though both shots strangely misfired. Richard Lawrence was detained, quickly declared insane when he claimed to be a deposed English king, and institutionalized. Due to public curiosity surrounding the double misfires, the pistols were tested repeatedly and performed perfectly each time. Many Americans superstitiously believed that Jackson had been protected by the same Providence that protected the young nation and fueled American expansion (Clarke 237). This cultural idea of Providence, or divine intervention, inspired a wave of nationalism that countered the pessimism that resulted from the Panic of 1837. Also in 1837, Democrat Martin Van Buren was inaugurated as president though his victory was chiefly due to the fact that he ran against a deeply divided Whig party whose three candidates – Hugh L. White, Henry Clay, and William Henry Harrison – split the vote (Campbell).

This political disunity persisted into the 1840s but was relegated to the sidelines of American concerns by the first great wave of westward migration. In 1845, John L. O'Sullivan, a columnist and editor, wrote about the "fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the

continent allotted by Providence" to promote the annexation of Texas and Oregon (O'Sullivan 6). He thus coined the term "Manifest Destiny," which quickly caught on with expansionist politicians and the general public. During this decade, the country's territorial borders expanded considerably with the entrance of Florida, Texas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin and the signing of the Oregon Treaty, which established the 49th parallel as the border between the United States and Canada. Despite marked progress in defining the borders of the United States, America's government and economy exhibited a troubling indecisiveness and lack of direction. President Van Buren signed into law the Independent Treasury Act of 1840, which made the federal government exclusively responsible for managing its own funds; the act was soon repealed in 1841. A string of political tragedies and missteps followed the inauguration of William Henry Harrison in 1841 when the new president died only a month into his term from pneumonia. Subsequently, during John Tyler's presidency after he made decisions against raising tariffs in a time of federal revenue shortage, Whigs in the House of Representatives initiated both the first impeachment attempt of an American president as well as the first overriding of a presidential veto (Campbell).

My purpose for providing what seems like a broad historical account of events that occurred in these two decades is multi-fold: to demonstrate the economic and political turbulence that opposed the government's attempt to solidify the young nation's infrastructure, and to explain the alternating surges in American nationalism, pessimism, and apprehension. I also sought to identify periods when the American government sacrificed its moral integrity – specifically with regard to slavery and violence inflicted upon Native Americans and Mexicans – out of expansionist greed, and to emphasize that this was a time of rapid, drastic change. Change often incites chaos. I argue that Poe's literature lives and thrives in this chaos and that the

anxieties he associates with isolation, boundaries, and madness all find their roots in the collective fears of the American people. Poe's representations of boundaries echo the unspoken but transparent apprehensions about the burdensome responsibility of drawing territorial distinctions, forming laws, precedents, and governing systems, and establishing order and control in a new nation. In many ways, the spirit of Manifest Destiny encompassed not only the pioneering of unsettled lands but also the figurative pioneering of a country with an unsolidified national identity and uncertain future. With regard to Poe's recurrent themes of isolation and intimacy, America's newly won independence gave cause for pride but also concern as estrangement from England meant a lack of protection from the rest of the global community. In considering possible future allies, America had to exercise caution, though seclusion was not a viable option either; this conflict demonstrates on a much larger scale the aversion to isolation and simultaneous fear of and desire for intimacy exhibited by Poe's characters.

To expound upon one theme in Poe's stories that I briefly mentioned but have purposefully left unexamined thus far – the theme of social imprisonment – I would like to draw on the story of Richard Lawrence, the man who attempted to assassinate President Jackson. Lawrence was a social pariah in every respect: he was British, uneducated, a house painter by trade and thus a member of the working class. Described to have been a "relatively fine young boy" by acquaintances and relatives at his trial, Lawrence exhibited an abrupt change in disposition in his adulthood. He quit his job, claiming that he did not need to work because the United States government owed him money and President Jackson's opposition to the establishment of a national bank prevented him from receiving his money. Meanwhile, Lawrence also displayed noticeable changes in personality and appearance: despite his lack of income, he replaced his once conservative wardrobe with pricy, gaudy clothes; he broadcasted his belief that

he was King Richard III of England and was referred to as such by his peers, though he did not perceive that they were mocking him; he laughed and talked to himself at length; he also grew increasingly paranoid and violent. On two separate occasions, he threatened to kill a maid and his sister because he thought they had been talking about or laughing at him; eventually, he began physically abusing his sisters regularly (Clarke 236-238). Though historians satisfy themselves with the explanation that Lawrence's madness resulted from his habitual inhalation of paint chemicals, I would like to offer an alternative hypothesis, one that perhaps Poe might support: Lawrence's madness was at least in part the result of his social imprisonment which, in this case, translates to a lack of social mobility even in the promised land of opportunity. He could never escape his status as an outsider; indeed, he was born into it.

We might notice the shocking parallels between Lawrence's story and those of Prince Prospero with his taste for the extravagant and the flamboyant especially in fashion, the narrator of "The Black Cat" with his paranoia and lack of remorse for abusing his family members, and Roderick Usher who frequently talks and laughs to himself. For various reasons, all of these men lived as outcasts from the rest of society and displayed indications of mental disorder though they were all, at one point in their stories, "normal." We have become conditioned to blame the sick for their sickness, to assume that their madness is the result of some inborn mental deficiency or defect, but Poe suggests that people can be driven mad by their rejection by and ejection from society, which naturally condemns them to living their lives in isolation. Though Lawrence was not physically banished from society until he was committed to an asylum following his assassination attempt, he never savored a sense of belonging. His story relays the potential destructiveness of normative social forces that include, but are by no means limited to, the marginalization of the lower class, stigmatization and institutionalized ostracism of the

mentally impaired, and gender constructions that place pressure on men to earn money and provide for their families. The uncanny similarities between Lawrence's story and the fates of Poe's main characters expose the fundamental question posed by the American Gothic, and all Gothic literature for that matter: *from where does the true threat to our humanity and our existence originate?* Is self-destruction programmed into our biological and cognitive makeups or do the societies to which we belong oppress us in undetectable but profoundly ruinous ways? More critically, is madness a disease of the individual or the disease of the entire society? As he delves into questions that have long vexed not just the American people but all people across temporal, geographic, and social boundaries, Poe forces us to wonder if we ourselves are susceptible to madness, others are susceptible to madness, and our society instigates madness, who are we left to trust? In this thesis, I endeavored not to find irrefutable answers to these and many other unsettling existential questions, for I am not sure that such rigid answers exist, but to contribute my light to the gradual illumination of these hazy, obscured intellectual territories.

1. Masked Menaces and Malicious Maladies in "The Masque of the Red Death"

"The Masque of the Red Death" distinguishes itself from the other short stories examined in this thesis because the misfortune and malevolence that befall the characters are not necessarily products of their own intentional actions. In this story, Poe makes us painfully aware of our humanity, our mortality, and the fact that any control we believe we exert is a grand delusion for we are always at the mercy of overpowering forces that operate with indifference towards the inconsequential circumstances of our lives. In his book Edgar Allan Poe: Rhetoric and Style, Brett Zimmerman asserts, the "existential depiction of humanity's condition in 'The Masque of the Red Death' is the most terrifying thing in all of Poe's fiction, beside which his Gothic accounts of vampires, black cats, witches, metempsychosis, and reanimated mummies are mere 'bugaboo tales'" (Zimmerman 62). By questioning the extents of and dwarfing the scope of human power, Poe recognizes the multitude of boundaries that people erect in order to maintain the illusion of social order and control – specifically boundaries that separate groups of people and boundaries that seek to detach dichotomous concepts. Poe confronts this culturally ingrained fear of a world without boundaries because living in such a world would mean fully accepting that everyone, regardless of class or other social distinctions, is subject to the same fate and, thus, individuals are all fundamentally equal. Living in a world governed by self-constructed boundaries also perpetuates our denial of the fact that the overriding forces of the universe pay no heed to our flimsy barriers. And yet, though the story of Prince Prospero on the surface details one man's futile efforts to keep external threats out of his material world, Poe puts forth another

much more concerning possibility: the true threat comes from within the boundaries we have so carefully drawn and maintained.

Unlike in "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which he draws upon the Gothic trope of a haunted house, Poe sets "The Masque of the Red Death" in a "castellated abbey" or, in other words, a castle – another distinctly Gothic venue (Kennedy 37). Prince Prospero's castle is "amply provisioned" with formidable security measures, including a "strong and lofty wall" with "gates of iron" with which to "bid defiance to contagion" (Kennedy 37). Prospero also instructs a team of his courtiers to bring "furnaces and massy hammers" so that they may "[wield] the bolts" of the gates from the inside, allowing neither "ingress or egress" (Kennedy 37). This literal boundary that keeps unwanted entities out implicitly serves another purpose as well, which is to keep everyone and everything in. In this way, though Prospero's guests succumb to the illusion that they are safe from the Red Death and in good company, in truth, they are the ones who are isolated, imprisoned, and thus naturally vulnerable. In line with this illusion of security, the meticulous detail with which the narrator describes the wall, gates, and bolting process – which echoes the meticulousness with which Prospero secures his castle – impresses upon us that these methods of protection are either excessive or ill conceived with regards to the true threat at hand. Indeed, the fact that the narrator dedicates so much effort to describing the castle's security features foreshadows their ultimate failure to protect the inhabitants. While Prospero's intentions seem honorable and protective, we should also consider what kind of prince closes his castle doors to his kingdom while it faces perilous crisis.

The fortified walls transform Prospero's castle into a microcosm wherein the events of the outside world have no effect on the lives of the guests within. Because they are completely uprooted from their previous lives, their conceptions of social order are wiped clean and the

guests in effect become sheep – because their survival depends entirely on Prospero's benefaction, his word is now their law. Though "his dominions were half depopulated" by the raging epidemic of the Red Death, implying that he is directly responsible for these ravaged populations and territories, Prospero persuades his favored guests that the "external world could take care of itself" and that it is "folly to grieve, or to think" (Kennedy 37). He encourages them instead to replace contemplation with the "appliances of pleasure" (Kennedy 37). Because he exercises complete dominion within his castle walls, Prospero wields the power to stipulate how his guests should live their lives, namely, in the same way he lives his own life – extravagantly, hedonically, superficially, and thoughtlessly. In this way, Prospero establishes and maintains his idea of social organization within the bounds of his control, and though his instructions should strike his guests as pointedly oppressive, he distracts from his despotism with ample provisions of entertainment, food, drink, and security. To honor Poe's affinity for wordplay, the castle becomes an asylum, both in that it provides Prospero and his guests with a safe haven from the Red Death and also houses people who, living in wildly altered realities, have lost their ability to reason.

The revisualization of Prospero's castle as a madhouse comes to a head during the prince's masquerade. Again, the narrator hints at Prospero's tyranny: "…it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders" (Kennedy 39). The masquerade becomes a free-for-all abandonment of social conventions and moral codes and the perfect venue for the trespassing of boundaries. To this idea, the narrator describes, "There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust," contradicting our previously held notion that that which is beautiful cannot inherently also be terrible or disgusting (Kennedy 40). There is, however, one

unspoken figurative boundary that, upon their acknowledgement of the "presence of a masked figure" whose "mask…was made so nearly to resemble…the type of the Red Death," all the guests recognize has been crossed (Kennedy 41). Out of solidarity with the appalled and offended guests, the narrator righteously proclaims, "There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made" (Kennedy 41). Therein, he uses comedy to eliminate the boundary between life and death, a common practice by those who use humor to access and express tragedy, but validates that even humor is not a domain free of limits. The good humor and celebratory spirit are likewise restrained and divided into hour-long intervals of merriment, punctuated by the "dull, heavy, monotonous clang" of the large ebony clock from the seventh chamber (Kennedy 39). The chiming of the clock, which causes the "giddiest [to grow] pale, and the more aged and sedate [to pass] their hands over their brows as if in confused revery or meditation," serves as a recurring reminder to the guests of their mortality, their time on earth ticking slowly away, forewarning them of their impending doom (Kennedy 39). In this way, the chiming of the clock temporarily dissolves the barrier between truth and delusion, allowing the guests to see the harsh reality underlying their shallow, meaningless lives. After the chiming stops, however, the guests "looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly," re-entering their deluded state, only to experience again the "same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before" at the top of each hour (Kennedy 39). Prospero himself displays the same debilitating fear of death and accompanying denial of fear in his decisions to seclude and fortify his castle from the Red Death and then to hold a lavish masquerade ball, all the while pretending that nothing is amiss outside his castle walls.

Though we are quickly swept up into the glitz and glamour of Prospero's artificial world, the very first image shown to us is that of the dying victim of the Red Death. The narrator describes the "scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim" which were the "pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men" (Kennedy 37). This description implies that each sufferer of the sickness must die alone, having been shunned and quarantined by society. The narrator immediately juxtaposes this image of the ostracized dying victim with the image of the "thousand hale and light-hearted friends" Prospero "summon[s] to his presence," clearly establishing the binary between intimacy and isolation (Kennedy 37). Because Prospero could easily have shut his castle doors to everyone, including his friends, to protect himself from the viciousness of the disease, and gradually learning of his vanity and egotism, we must wonder why he decides to host company at such a dire time. Perhaps Prospero, like any other man, fears dying alone should the Red Death breach his castle's boundaries; perhaps he hopes that entertaining guests would distract him from the perilous state of affairs in his kingdom. For whatever the reason, the presence of his friends brings him obvious contentment and we assume that he feels some level of intimacy with these thousand "knights and dames of his court" (Kennedy 37). Surrounded by his closest companions and unfaltering at the threat of the Red Death, Prospero's decision to hold a celebration while his people are dying, though morally unsound, comes as no surprise; what should catch our attention is that Poe, whose writing presents few narrative coincidences, specifies that this is no ordinary celebration – it is a masquerade ball.

A masquerade, by definition, requires all attendees to wear a mask to conceal their true identities. Though the narrator does not draw particular attention to this contingency or even mention the guests' masks, this compulsory concealment of identity rather antagonizes the idea

that a celebration brings people together. In hiding behind a mask, each individual establishes a physical barrier between himself and everyone else, in effect isolating himself in anonymity. Momentarily taken out of the context of merry-making, these masks give rise to a general sentiment of distrust and uncertainty, preventing true intimacy between the guests. Furthermore, the masks serve to equalize the guests, eliminating any previous boundaries between those of different social classes but also emphasizing the dissolution of their individual identities; the guests have all conformed to Prospero's preferences in costume and disposition, adopting the same identity. The narrator leaves it unclear whether Prospero himself also dons a mask though we can assume that, even if he does, his is the only identity that cannot be completely concealed or disregarded. The distinction of his identity casts Prospero as an outsider even at his own celebration, whereby he establishes a marked and necessary boundary between self and other. In the final paragraph of the story, the narrator describes the deaths of Prospero and the masqueraders with very pointed language: "And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall" (Kennedy 42). The narrator accentuates the solitude in which each of the guests dies with the phrases "one by one" and "died each," making it clear that, though theirs is a collective death by the same cause and though they sought to avenge Prospero's death, they each die separately, "despairing" and probably very frightened (Kennedy 42). While Poe cleverly demonstrates the brief co-existence of intimacy and isolation at the masquerade, where Prospero and his guests relish each other's company while remaining fixedly isolated behind their masks, he conveys that intimacy is often nothing more than a comfortable delusion and that isolation is the only authentic existence.

In her book Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature, Milette Shamir, a professor of American Literature at Tel Aviv University, hypothesizes that the

Red Death allegorizes the "invasion and coerced exposure of interiority" by the "social tyranny that deprives the private heart of life" (Shamir 7). She holds that the disease's symptoms, specifically the "profuse bleeding at the pores" with bodily "dissolution" (Kennedy 37), represents the "literal gutting of the interior" while she views the "scarlet stain" left on the victims' bodies to be the demarcation of the interior made exterior (Shamir 7). In line with Poe's habit of mirroring characters' interior environments with their external environments, Shamir likens Prospero's castle to an "extension of the prince's body (at the midst of which is the 'deep blood,' heartlike, chamber of privacy" (Shamir 7). Her main concerns revolve around the boundary between private and public life, concerns which dovetail seamlessly with our investigation of the boundary between intimacy and isolation, as well as with our identification of "social tyranny" as the main external threat. Shamir asserts that the external threat is "exacerbated by the presence of the 'lodgers' in Prince Prospero's castle" and the internal threat comes from the possibility that his guests will "unbolt the gates and join forces with the sickly masses outside"; the castle is thereby equally "endangered by society without and by the domestic other within" and therefore "doomed to have its innermost depths infected and destroyed" (Shamir 7). It is at this point in her otherwise fastidious analysis that we must part ways, for her premises depend on the idea that Prospero's guests retain their autonomy and individuality once shepherded into the castle. Though we agree that Prospero's guests indeed play the role of "domestic other" in the sense that their hidden identities keep them distinctly separate from the prince, the true threat does not necessarily stem from their otherness, because they have readily and completely conformed to Prospero's demands and tastes. Shamir's theories also do not account for the fact that the external threat *becomes* the internal threat when the Red Death infiltrates the castle, subverting her idea of the private life being forced outward.

Regardless, given what we know about Poe's tendency to question the inborn morality of human nature, we discern that the true threat originates from within each individual – from each guests' willingness to forgo their singularity and from Prospero's arrogant belief that he could evade death by constructing a new, smaller-scale utopic society within the crumbling larger society.

If we liken Prospero's satellite society within his castle walls to the young United States, still reeling from its battle for independence, Poe accesses a number of profound fears and reservations about the future of such a new, not yet stabilized country. Primarily, Poe expresses a fear of inept leadership or even arbitrary dictatorship through his characterization of Prospero, a prince who perhaps means well but rules with little tact or genuine consideration for the well being of his subjects. Prospero also embodies the destructive trait of hubris – his ultimate downfall – that allows him to believe that he and his guests are somehow exempt from death and atonement for their gluttonous sins simply because of their privilege and class power. It is his insurmountable pride, his invincibility complex, that drives Prospero to pursue the Red Death through the chambers during the masquerade, arming himself with a mere dagger against an overwhelming force that dwarfs his own earthly power. Because we recognize that Prospero's egotism blinds him from seeing the truth of things, we regard his final act – the impulsive pursuit and confrontation of the uninvited guest – as an act of foolishness rather than bravery. His unthinking nature is also evidenced by his lavish, eccentric, dramatic, and downright wasteful preferences: "His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not" (39). Poe's depiction of Prospero as a dictator is unmistakable with his use of the words "barbaric," to describe the brashness of his taste, and "followers," whereas they were once referred to as his

guests. The choppiness of the last two sentences in the passage sounds not unlike a hasty pledge of allegiance to a tyrant whose madness is obvious but unutterable for fear of retribution.

Poe never sheds light on how exactly Prospero comes to power over his kingdom though we may safely assume, given his titles of "prince" and "duke," a monarchical system of governance (Kennedy 38). This story may be considered a criticism of conventional monarchies, which is not an overreaching theory considering Poe first published the story in 1842, not even 100 years after the fight for independence from Britain when the salted wounds and resentment towards the British monarchy were still fresh. Though his condemnation of monarchy does not necessarily equate to whole-hearted support of democracy, Poe cautions the American people of his time to carefully consider in whom and where they invest their trust. While he presents us with the possible dangers of placing too much power in the hands of a man who exhibits blinding ambition, ignorant extravagance, and base impulsiveness, Poe raises a number of deeper concerns that veritably leave us with no preferable alternatives.

Upon his introduction in the story, the narrator describes Prospero to be "happy and dauntless and sagacious," all traits one might associate with a "good" person and perhaps even with a competent leader (Kennedy 37). This is, however, the first and last time the narrator speaks of the prince's character without a slight tinge of contempt for his disreputable "love of the bizarre" (Kennedy 38), "delirious fancies," and "madman fashions" (Kennedy 39). As the narrator's depictions of the prince's peculiarities grow increasingly disapproving and accusatory throughout the story, we see in retrospect that his initial flattering characterization represents an objective first impression, one that anyone might have upon first meeting the dynamic, charming prince. The narrator intentionally leads us to form a positive preliminary opinion of the prince just so that he may gradually prove how deceiving and inconsistent first impressions can be with

people's true natures and carefully concealed design flaws. The motifs of the masquerade and masks coincide, though not coincidentally, with this inability to discern people's true natures. By demonstrating the fallibility of external appearances, Poe forces us to reevaluate the ways in which we judge and determine the capability and trustworthiness of other people, especially people on whom we bestow governing power. Yet, Poe also conveys that, as Prospero literally does in the story, people deliberately build walls around themselves, clear and tangible divides between self and other, barriers meant either to protect themselves and the integrities of their identities from alteration by normative society, or to purposefully conceal their weaknesses and depravities. So how can we ever truly know a person without knowing how many levels of barriers we must break through before we reach their true essence, their bared soul? And how can we protect ourselves from the consequences of their deception without isolating ourselves within impenetrable walls and fortresses of our own? Poe proves the inseparability of intimacy and vulnerability, the mutual letting down of barriers, but indicates that even the construction of these barriers cannot fully protect people's internal environments from infiltration by outside forces.

Outside of his concern about people hiding their true natures, with either defensive or devious intentions, Poe raises another disturbing possibility with regard to the reign of Prince Prospero – the possibility that Prospero was a normal, balanced man prior to his ascent to the throne, and it was the power and pressure accompanying his title that drove him to his own flamboyant, egotistical brand of madness. Whereas we are inclined to point fingers at Prospero for his lack of tact and foresight, Poe never explicitly criticizes or vilifies him or his decisions; perhaps Poe's intention was for us to assume the best in Prospero, to view him as a victim of his unforgiving circumstances. Notably, there is no mention of a king or queen, insinuating that

Prospero was never taught or given an example of how to lead his kingdom. Yet he assumes his duty because the populace demands a leader, if not for guidance and governance, then at least to identify a scapegoat to blame for any crises or misfortunes. Prospero's madness should then be considered a direct result of the pressures of societal expectations and exigencies, pressures that Poe suggests we all succumb to in varying degrees. This vantage, in one respect, enables us to empathize with the misunderstood Prospero; conversely, however, if we accept that Prospero is in truth an ordinary man put under extraordinary circumstances that cause him to behave erratically, if we accept that power and greed can poison any previously untarnished soul, are not all of our leaders susceptible to madness? How are we to trust anyone, let alone give him or her absolute dominion? Poe reveals the vicious cycle powering society's systems of government – society places pressure on certain individuals to assume leadership roles; the same pressures, now gilded in the varnishes of prestige and power, cause our leaders to go mad, leaving us to be governed by madmen whose unreasonable decrees and regulations, in turn, produce more madmen.

In encumbering ourselves with the thorny question of whether we can trust Prospero's intentions as a leader, we neglect to consider the credibility of the source of all of our information. Poe so successfully distracts us with the "glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm" of Prospero's castle that we barely notice the voice and identity of his narrator, who uses first-person narration minimally so as to detract attention from himself (Kennedy 39). With more careful and purposeful observation, we become aware of some flagrant inconsistencies in the narration. For one, Poe leads us to believe, from a number of instances in which the narrator expresses empathy for Prospero and his guests, that he sides with the protagonist and therefore with us. The narrator also exhibits overt anachronisms, assuming the story takes place in the

distant past characterized by court life and irrepressible epidemics, namely with his mention of "Hernani," a play by Victor Hugo that premiered in 1830, depicting rampant moral corruption within the royal Spanish court (Houston 53). In another instance, the narrator ascertains that the uninvited, cloaked guest "out-Heroded Herod" (Kennedy 41), referring to the biblical King Herod of Judea who, beginning his reign in 37 B.C., protected his dominion with unassailable egomania and unspeakable violence ("King Herod"). Though we could argue that the narrator possesses knowledge of King Herod because he is well-read or educated, the only explanation for his acquaintance with Hugo's play is that he survived the Red Death. Certainly, he must have survived the epidemic in order for him to recount the story of Prospero's downfall and describe, in meticulous detail, the interior of the castle – even the furnishings of the ill-omened seventh chamber where "none of the maskers venture" (Kennedy 41). But, given this inference, we run into a serious problem: nobody survived the Red Death; the story concludes, "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (Kennedy 42). Thus, the only possible agent who was present at the onset of the epidemic, during the fortification of Prospero's castle and the revelry of his masquerade, and in the seventh chamber when Prospero and all of his guests finally succumb to the disease is the Red Death itself. This theory would also provide an alternative explanation of the narrator's anachronistic allusion to Herod – that the Red Death has existed as long as, or even longer than, humans have documented their history.

Poe's story exemplifies the popular adage, originally articulated by Winston Churchill, "History is written by the victors." But Poe also queries, what if the villains are the victors? What are we to make of the possibility that our stories, our histories, are told and thus preserved by treacherous agents? And, most chillingly, if we were so easily led to believe that the narrator was "one of us," how are we to make peace with the knowledge that the true threat came from

within our ranks and that it planted itself there despite our defensive maneuvers and without our detection? Therein, Poe delineates the boundary between the extents of man's material power and the domain of forces out of man's control; the inescapability of the Red Death conveys Poe's belief that we must settle for living at the mercy of these forces, accept that our might is regrettably limited, and learn, from Prospero's fate, the danger of refusing to accept our subordination. Man can only hope to control what is within his earthly domain by establishing boundaries and rules; likewise, he can only hope to curb the risk of betrayal by his fellow men by establishing social classes by which he can predict the behaviors and capabilities of those within each class.

Though "The Masque of the Red Death" could easily be read as an exposé of the brutal classism of American society, in reference to Prospero's lack of remorse about the literal death of the lower class in his kingdom, the conclusion of the story corroborates the contrary. It is true that, at one point in the story, the only survivors of the epidemic are Prospero's guests, all of whom have "willingly" conformed to Prospero's tastes and behavioral codes. Thus, briefly, the society of the story becomes homogenous, composed of unthinking upper-crust clones that all dress, act, and behave the same way. However, by the end of the story, even they are not exempt from the same grisly, macabre end as their less privileged compatriots. In this way, the Red Death, like the masks, acts as an equalizing social force, demolishing all boundaries constructed to separate and evaluate, reminding us that our mortality and fallibility unify us in our common humanity; Poe, ever the critic of widely accepted social institutions and infrastructures, confronts the powerful reality that, though we are not all born into equal circumstances, everyone is equal in death. By ending his story with the final, reverberating impression of death's total dominion, Poe recognizes the finiteness and inconsequentiality of the boundaries we draw in life, drawing

philosophically from a critical theory by Jacques Derrida which will be examined in closer detail in the following chapter.

2. Salacious Secrets and Suspected Sentience in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

In one of his richest short stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe further problematizes the already flimsy boundaries between self and other, the earthly and the sublime, and morality and immorality, amongst other dichotomies. Curiously, he also manages to blur the boundary between two concepts that should ordinarily be entirely exclusive of one another: life and death. While we struggle alongside Poe's nameless narrator to maintain orientation and reason in the haunted House of Usher, Poe offers a glimpse into the world of a madman who exhibits unexplainable, incurable, and disturbing symptoms of mental disorder. The pitiable case of Roderick Usher, and the narrator's inexplicable determination to alleviate his childhood friend's spiritual burdens, forces us to then question our preconceptions of what it means to be sane versus insane, and rational versus irrational. In playing with these divides and dualities, Poe calls into question not only the fortitude of these boundaries, but also for what reasons and with what authority and level of confidence we establish them in the first place.

Poe first establishes a marked boundary in the story when the narrator notices the physical atmosphere around the House of Usher and its vicinity, which he describes as a "pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (Kennedy 128). Poe makes no attempt to conceal the haunted estate in its natural surroundings; he wants to be very clear that the circumstances within the atmosphere of the House of Usher are distinct and separate from those outside of the house's vicinity. Indeed, the narrator expresses, upon his arrival, that a "sense of insufferable gloom pervaded [his] spirit" (Kennedy 126). In this sentence alone, only the second sentence of the story, Poe begins to introduce his language of separation

and barriers, specifically with his choice of the verb "pervaded" to describe the power of the gloominess. For an entity to have the ability to pervade an area, it must, by definition, spread throughout with no regard for or hindrance by preexisting boundaries. The sense of gloom veritably invades the narrator's previously undisturbed spirit and steals away his peace of mind. Here, Poe introduces the idea that feelings and thoughts stimulated by external factors can intrude quite easily upon the boundary between "self" and outside of self, or "other." Though most people perceive a logical separation between what they embrace as "self" and what they perceive as "other," the plight of Poe's narrator demonstrates that this barrier grants passage to even the most unfounded or improbable fancies brought on by outside stimuli.

If we approach this story as generally honest and unbiased readers, we should be inclined to trust and empathize with the narrator until our instincts are otherwise alerted. The narrator also employs a number of tactics to foster our trust in him, for example, drawing on relatable common experiences. He goes out of his way to explain his rationale for choosing the word "insufferable" to describe the extent of the gloom around the manor: "…for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible" (Kennedy 126). He does not restrict this sensation to being unique to his own experience, instead referring to "the mind" to signify that all minds have the tendency to respond to terrible images with half-pleasure. Knowingly or unknowingly, he makes a strategic narrative move here by appealing to his entire audience; those who have experienced this half-pleasure understand him and those who have not assume that he has the authority to deem that experience as normal or universal, thereby making them the abashed outliers. In either case, the narrator wins our trust in some form here, and so we follow him into the story.

The narrator concurrently works to prove not only that he is a trustworthy storyteller, but also that he is and was a rational agent at the time when the events of his story occurred. We should note that the narrator is recounting this story from his memories, so he is presumably both temporally and physically removed from the events on which he reports, and that this style of narration has very different implications than if he told the story as if it were occurring in real-time. The problem arises, with recounting stories from memory, that people often manipulate, appropriate, or incorrectly recall the details of their pasts either for ulterior motives or by natural human error. We should assume that any storyteller has a conscious or sometimes unconscious agenda – which initially manifests itself in the desire to simply be heard – for why he shares his story and it is then our responsibility to identify his purpose and decide whether to sympathize with him given the plausibility of his account. Therefore, the more persuasively a narrator can convince his audience of his rationality and trustworthiness while telling his story, the more likely his audience will sympathize with him by the end of it.

To assure us of his lucidity and rationality, Poe's narrator tempers his fanciful description of the oppressive atmosphere by providing a logical explanation for his apprehension: "There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition – for why should I not so term it? – served mainly to accelerate the increase itself" (Kennedy 128). By brushing aside his own fears and reducing them to unfounded superstition, he also calms our nerves and throws off our suspicions. He continues examining the exterior of the house, "shaking off from [his] spirit what *must* have been a dream" (Kennedy 128). Interestingly, the italics call unnecessary attention to the word "must" in order to demonstrate that the narrator temporarily convinces himself that there is no perceptible reason for his sense of foreboding. The stylistic choice does, however, introduce the possibility of the alternative – that perhaps the narrator's

alarm was caused by something tangible and real, though unexplainable and unlikely. By tying dreaming to the improbable or impossible, Poe acknowledges the boundaries that *must* surely exist between reality and fantasy, and lucidity and delusion.

For whatever reason, the physical surroundings of the House of Usher cause Poe's narrator to experience an "utter depression of the soul which [he] can compare to no earthy sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil" (Kennedy 126). Poe's word choice may indicate his own resentful sentiments towards sobriety, the "bitter lapse into everyday life," but what is more interesting is that he regards sobriety as an interruption of life in a drug-induced dream state. He refers to the process of becoming sober and lucid as the "hideous dropping off of the veil," utilizing again the language of separation to characterize the divide between sobriety and inebriation as a "veil" that presumably protects the dreamer from the complications of living in reality. But what are the implications of dropping this veil, thereby removing the barrier between dreams and reality and allowing fantasy to bleed into fact? Poe exposes us to this dangerous idea that, should this barrier be removed, we must redefine what constitutes "reality" and broaden the horizons of our realms of possibility.

By awakening us to our own perceptions of what can and cannot be true, Poe also reveals that, although boundaries help us to compartmentalize and make sense of the contrasting parts of our lives, they also confine and isolate us. Because we all set down boundaries differently and have varying degrees of cognitive flexibility, what we perceive as common human experiences may simply be artificial opportunities for connection and intimacy. It is more likely that we are all experiencing unique realities founded on self-generated truths that we can sometimes communicate to others in the hopes of being heard and understood. But meaning-making is a

lonely process for, ultimately, we are all restricted to experiencing the world through our own perspectives. Poe speaks to this profound solitude by rendering two different forms of confinement in the story: physical entrapment in enclosed spaces and figurative imprisonment in one's own circumstances and mind. We may refer to these concepts as external confinement and internal confinement, respectively, in our examination of the character of Roderick Usher who is arguably a prisoner of both his physical and mental circumstances.

The descriptions of Roderick's home, of his private chambers especially, connote an unmistakable sense of oppression and consequent decay despite the narrator's observation that the spaces are "very large and lofty" (Kennedy 129). Though the size of the space should counter the stifling atmosphere, the narrator notes "the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling" (Kennedy 129). The overabundance of space actually contradicts the appearance of visibility and openness because the narrator's vision is still, in some way, obscured. The room acts as an allegory for the narrator's grasp on his situation; throughout the story, his "vision" is blurred by a number of factors – his loyalty to his childhood friend, the malevolent spirit of the estate, his lack of knowledge about the Usher family – preventing him from gaining clarity and making rational decisions. In this way, Poe proves that excessive space can be just as restricting as limited space. Because the ceilings in the chamber are so high, the narrator also notices that the windows are "so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within" (Kennedy 129). This observation suggests that Roderick's room literally imprisons him with no means of escape or exit save for the doorway. Though we previously distinguished between external and internal confinement for clarification purposes, we should also consider that Poe constructs his settings as physical manifestations of his characters' mental states. Thus it follows

that, because Poe depicts Roderick's literal confinement in his lavish but barren home, Roderick must feel similarly imprisoned mentally or spiritually.

Throughout the story, Roderick's condition is described using exceedingly vague and aversive language. In terms of Roderick's physical decline, the narrator notes the "cadaverousness" and "ghastly pallor of the skin," the "now miraculous lustre of the eye," and his inability to connect the "Arabesque expression" on Roderick's face "with any idea of simple humanity" (Kennedy 130). It is the last facet of this description – the observation that Roderick has departed or detached from his humanity – that indicates the presence of an affliction more insidious than a common physical malady, one that causes an "incoherence – an inconsistency" in Roderick's mental state (Kennedy 130). The narrator characterizes the mental symptoms of Roderick's illness as a "habitual trepidancy," an "excessive nervous agitation" that manifests itself in dualities in Roderick's temperament (Kennedy 130). Roderick's actions are "alternately vivacious and sullen"; his voice changes drastically from "tremulous indecision" to "energetic concision"; and though he seems detached from his sense of self and his surroundings, he experiences a "morbid acuteness of the senses" (Kennedy 131). Much of Roderick's agitation seems to stem from trying to reconcile these polarities and ironies in his temperament, to which the narrator finds him a "bounden slave" (Kennedy 131). Here again, Poe incorporates the language of oppression to allegorize Roderick's illness as a form of imprisonment within his own body. The idea of enslavement within one's body complicates the divide between self and other because it suggests that even the self exhibits concentric layers separated by marked dividers with each layer harnessing the potential to confine, each divider harnessing the potential to restrict free expression of the innermost self.

In order to escape and express his suffering momentarily, Roderick turns to various forms of art, specifically painting. The narrator describes one of his "phantasmagoric conceptions," again using vocabulary that insinuates some sort of diffusion of the supernatural into reality, as an "immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls" (Kennedy 133). He perceives that this "excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth" and that "no outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent" and no "source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout" (Kennedy 133). This description inevitably brings to mind the image of a coffin or tomb, especially with the artist's decision not to include any means of access into or out of this empty enclosure. Yet, though we might expect the painting to carry an oppressive or morbid connotation, the "flood of intense rays" suggests that Roderick does not shrink from the idea of being entombed underground and instead views it as a happy possibility. The idea that the painting represents death as a preferable alternative to Roderick's current state is reinforced by the description of the vault's walls as "smooth, white, and without interruption or device," which speak to the unbroken perpetuity of death (Kennedy 133).

Oddly, Roderick is not the only resident of the House of Usher suffering from a mysterious illness of unknown origin. Quite unlike Usher's nervous agitation, however, his twin sister Madeline's sickness manifests itself in a "settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character" (Kennedy 132). We should not neglect the detail that Roderick and Madeline are twins, a detail that Roderick discloses when the narrator notices a "striking similitude between the brother and sister" (Kennedy 137). The narrator also mentions offhandedly that the "stem of the Usher race…had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" (Kennedy 127). Though he diplomatically masks the true meaning

behind the Usher family history – that the lineage has been continued through incestuous breeding – with a clarification that the "House of Usher" has come to represent both the estate and the family name to the "peasantry who used it" – he consequently implies that Roderick and Madeline are also romantically involved. Ingeniously, their incest exemplifies both the themes of challenging boundaries and being entrapped because, on one hand, the Ushers' relationships cross moral lines; on the other hand, because incest is part of their family tradition and culture, they are confined by their lack of choice in the matter. Strangely enough, the narrator seems unperturbed by the nature of the family's interrelations and rationalizes that such procreation was necessary to maintain the "perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people" (Kennedy 128). The language in this section overflows with suggestions that the Usher family has long lived on the outskirts of society, with the socioeconomic distinction between the Usher family and the "peasantry" and the haughty undertones of the phrase "accredited character." To perceive the divide between the Usher family and the rest of society is to understand that, just as their history of incest is kept a secret strictly within the family, their secrets are also literally kept within the confines of the estate and their self-imposed seclusion.

Roderick conveys to the narrator that, because of their biological similitude and intimate connection, "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed" between himself and Madeline (Kennedy 138). As is commonly the case in Poe's writing, this detail holds dual meanings. The "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature" could refer to their forbidden romantic involvement, or they could suggest that the siblings mastered a form of communication that only they can understand. Poe marks the divide between the explicit and the implicit and raises the possibility that there may exist transmittable messages, perhaps webs of

communication and stimuli that only those with extrasensory endowments can perceive. Because Roderick and Madeline experience similar mental disturbances, and though their respective afflictions manifest themselves in distinctive symptoms, they exist very much in their own realm separate from the rest of the world, a realm to which the narrator does not have access though they all inhabit the House of Usher together. In this way, Poe distinguishes the narrator as an outsider and establishes that there are indeed some boundaries that cannot be traversed.

After Madeline succumbs to her mysterious illness, Roderick beseeches the narrator to help him "preserve her corpse for a fortnight…in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building" (Kennedy 137). The narrator finds nothing amiss with this request and expresses that the "worldly reason assigned for this singular proceeding was one which [he] did not feel at liberty to dispute" (Kennedy 137). Though the burial scene itself passes without incident, the physical descriptions of Madeline's corpse and the tomb alert us to more boundaries Poe has purposely drawn in the story. The narrator woefully notes, after observing the "mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death," that Madeline's fatal disease has "entombed the lady in the maturity of youth" (Kennedy 138). He explicitly draws out the allegorical relationship between the lady's coffin, which literally entombs her body, and her disease, which has imprisoned her in a state of eternal youth, impervious to the passage of time. The descriptions of Madeline's body unsettle us because they are so reminiscent of a body full of life; here, Poe begins to problematize our perceptions of the divide between life and death, a disillusioning process that culminates in Madeline's horrifying resurrection at the story's conclusion. Poe does not endeavor merely to compel us to question the boundary between life and death; he, like Roderick, also fixates on the "sentience of all vegetable things" (Kennedy 136). This distinctly Gothic idea, that

objects and places, like people, can be haunted and possessed, pervades the language of story, especially in the narrator's descriptions that personify certain objects: "the…draperies, which, tortured into motion…swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about" (Kennedy 139). Notably, these descriptions increase in absurdity and frequency as the story progresses and the narrator becomes aware that Roderick's condition "terrified – that it infected [him]" (Kennedy 138). Though we naturally know that draperies cannot feel pain and thereby cannot be tortured or experience fits of unease, we may surmise that the anguish the narrator ascribes to "vegetable" objects is actually a projection of his own discomfort in the House of Usher, and of his perception of Roderick's suffering.

With regard to Madeline's death and Roderick's belief in the life and consciousness of inanimate entities, Poe pushes us to begin asking a series of difficult, interconnected questions: what demarcates being alive from being dead? Does some essence of a person remain or persist even in death? What does Poe imply by suggesting that non-living things possess an undetectable level of consciousness that allows them to impact the fate of the living? These questions all circle nervously around the conventional premise that life and death are exclusive states, that there exists a distinguishable barrier between the two that allows only a unidirectional flow from life to death. The features of the underground vault in which Roderick buries his sister – specifically the walls which are "sheathed with copper," the door "of massive iron," and the fact that the vault once served as a "donjon-keep" – symbolize our desperate, culturally ingrained need to conceptually separate life from death (Kennedy 137). The narrator notes that the vault is also "entirely without means of admission for light," reinforcing our notion that the conditions of the vault do not allow for life or growth (Kennedy 137). Interestingly, the vault, which is easily accessible from the house, seems to be fortified from the inside, as if to keep something

imprisoned there. Indeed, "in remote feudal times," the vault once housed actual prisoners and later, also held "highly combustible substances" (Kennedy 137). These seemingly inconsequential details weigh heavily with implications that the vault's only purpose has ever been to quarantine and control possible threats; and though the vault literally held explosive gun powders – substances that could detonate and demolish the house from its foundation at any moment – perhaps now the vault serves to keep "highly combustible" secrets instead, secrets that have the potential to destroy the foundation of the way we think of and perceive the world. The fact that inhabitants of the house are free to go down into the vault, yet there are protective measures in place to guarantee that nothing unwanted can escape, speaks also to the widely accepted notion that the living pass through life and ultimately encounter death, but the dead can never again access the world of the living.

Intentionally or not, Poe begins to equate the world of the living with what we perceive of as reality and, accordingly, he equates death with the unknown and the surreal. Roderick, in his state of physical and mental deterioration, lives on the border between life and death and, as a result, his mind seems to wander vexingly in a world where he struggles to differentiate between the real and the surreal. The narrator reports instances in which he catches Roderick "gazing upon vacancy for long hours…as if listening to some imaginary sound" and one specific incident when Roderick exclaims at the narrator, "You have not then seen it? – but, stay! you shall" (Kennedy 139). Roderick does not clarify exactly what "it" is that he has seen, but we can safely assume that whatever it is, it cannot be perceived by those who are free of the affliction that plagues him, like the phantom noises he alone can hear. And yet, the choppy language and punctuation express the sense of imploring desperation, of a manic certainty conveying that whatever Roderick sees is as real and apparent to him as his madness is to us. Then, when our

narrator – whose narration has been presumably trustworthy and rational until this point – resorts to reading a tale to calm Roderick's nerves, he, too, begins to perceive sounds from the story that cannot possibly originate from within the house. His grasp on reality has clearly loosened, his ability to separate the real from the fantastic diminished; it is at this juncture that the narrator loses his credibility and we are, so to speak, left to fend for ourselves in the story.

We see the destructive effects of fantasy seeping into reality, invading and uprooting our previously fixed cognitive conceptions of what can and cannot be, as well as those of the narrator. That Roderick, in his final moments, discerns that the sounds can be attributed to Madeline escaping from her entombment – "the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault" – also presents us with the burdensome responsibility of distinguishing fact from fiction, especially when he confesses, "We have put her living in the tomb!" (Kennedy 143). This motif of being buried alive or in inappropriate locations surfaces in a number of Poe's other short stories and relates again to the problematized division between life and death, such that even relatively rational agents in the stories confuse the living with the dead and the dead or inanimate with the living.

While Roderick and the narrator anticipate the arrival of his sister at the door of the chamber, Roderick shouts, "Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman! Madman!" (Kennedy 143). While it is unclear to whom in particular he directs this accusation, we may formulate a number of hypotheses. The narrator relays that when Roderick "shrieked out his syllables," it is as if "in the effort he were giving up his soul" (Kennedy 143). The phrase "giving up his soul" suggests that Roderick bares or sacrifices an integral part of himself in order to make some truth known; thus, we may consider Roderick's exclamation a sort of confession or acknowledgement of his own madness. Importantly, they are the last words he

utters; his identification of the madman in himself, his acceptance of the truth, and his admission of his guilt for entombing his living sister are his final acts in life. As an alternate hypothesis, Roderick may also be accusing the narrator of being a madman because, instead of attributing the noises to what Roderick assumes to be the obvious source, the narrator initially believes the noises he hears come from the story. Poe successfully pulls the rug from beneath our feet once more by assigning the madman the role of arbiter of madness and indicting the previously unquestioned sanity of the narrator, challenging our preconception that madmen cannot exercise rational judgment in situations or of other people. Therein, he boldly suggests that madness, which has an extensive history of social stigma and medical misunderstanding, is merely a biased construction, a means of representing differences in perception and a damning label that results from the inability to bridge these cognitive differences between individuals.

The third and final theory of which person Roderick accuses of being a madman incriminates an unlikely suspect: ourselves, the narrator's audience. Poe may have sought to employ a literary technique called "breaking the fourth wall" – an idea originally made explicit by the philosopher and critic Denis Diderot – wherein he, through his narrator, addresses the readers directly in order to draw us into the world of the story (Stevenson). In this case, Poe not only involves us in the story's events, he also implicates us for accepting the way the plot unfolds despite its moral ambiguities and for blindly trusting the narrator. As the narrator rationalizes his way through his story, subduing our instinctive suspicions and his own about the House of Usher's dark secrets, the limits of what we can accept and tolerate stretch to accommodate the storyteller for the sake of the story. While ordinarily we might be repulsed or alarmed by an incestuously perpetuated family lineage, the sudden "death" and live burial of the host's twin sister, or the idea of living in a mansion alone with a madman, we are inclined to

sympathize with the narrator and believe him when he reports that nothing is amiss. Yet perhaps this negotiation of the boundaries that we ourselves set down to govern what we can and cannot accept is precisely the action that Poe encourages by problematizing the authority and reliability of the narrator only towards the end of the story. If the narrator has been mad all along, or has at least had the potential to become mad, are we not also mad for being able to adopt his perspective? Roderick's accusation may likely be Poe's method of making us aware of our inclination to justify and rationalize that which we cannot explain and thus our own potential for madness. Poe goes to these lengths to emphasize the subjectivity of madness not only to demonstrate the impermanence of the lines we draw between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible but also to offer the explanation that we draw these lines in order to separate the self from the other. The need for self-recognition and awareness, which is intuitive and thus universal, influences individuals to view others with more judgment and to discount hypocrisy because only by identifying the differences between our actions and those of others can we establish our identities. For these reasons, it is often the case that we are quick to point fingers, to look for fault in others while justifying our own shortcomings and absolving ourselves of guilt, to deny that the darkness and madness we revile in others can just as easily be found within ourselves.

Poe toys with the barriers we erect to separate self from other throughout the story by introducing motifs such as mirrors, reflections, twins, and doubles. Though we have previously examined the relationship between Madeline and Roderick, a relationship that crosses moral boundaries because they are twins and also possible lovers, Poe's doubling between Roderick and the narrator challenges the notion that our bodies provide an adequate barrier between self and other. Towards the end of the story, the narrator begins to exhibit the same symptoms of

mental disorder as Roderick, specifically his susceptibility to "supernatural impressions" (Kennedy 131) and general "nervousness" (Kennedy 138); upon entering the world of Roderick's fanciful psyche, the narrator adopts Roderick's mental malady as his own. People also mirror their surroundings in the story. It would be difficult to attribute Roderick's eerie resemblance to the physical House of Usher to coincidence alone, especially considering Poe's artistic habit of paralleling his characters' internal and external conditions. Poe likens the "cadaverousness" of Roderick's complexion to the "vacant eye-like windows" and "bleak walls" of the estate and the "decayed trees" in the landscape; his "large, liquid, and luminous" (Kennedy 130) eyes recall the "black and lurid tarn" in its "unruffled lustre" (Kennedy 127). Roderick's hair, which is of a "more than web-like softness and tenuity," "[suffers] to grow all unheeded" (Kennedy 130), reminds us of the "minute fungi [which] overspread the whole exterior" of the house, "hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves" (Kennedy 128). The unmistakable parallelism between the disintegration of the house and the disintegration of Roderick's mind and body suggests not only Roderick's physical attachment to his estate but also his inescapable fixture in his iniquitous family legacy. It logically follows then that Roderick's death, because it signifies the end of the Usher lineage, causes the self-destruction of the family estate.

When the narrator first arrives at the house and intuits his first premonitions of the malevolence within, he stops at the tarn next to the house and "with a shudder even more thrilling than before – [gazed down] upon the remodeled and inverted images" (Kennedy 127). It is important that the reflection of the house in the tarn produces in the narrator a horror more profound than that evoked by observing the house itself because this scene conveys the otherworldliness and dark seductiveness of reflections. Poe uses these motifs to suggest that,

though mirrors provide us with what appears to be an exact reflection of ourselves and our surroundings, when we look in a mirror, we are still viewing the world through a lens that distorts our perception of what is real, thereby obscuring the truth of our internal and external conditions. We see that the narrator's experience in the haunted House of Usher tending to the extensive needs of his childhood friend serves as an overarching allegory of this theme of things not being what they seem or what we expect. When first walking through the house, he recounts, "While I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this – I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up" (Kennedy 129). The House becomes a rabbit hole in which the narrator's preexisting notions of time and truth are jumbled and distorted, in which he loses his iron grasp on reason and logic.

In addition to Poe's decision to characterize his unreliable narrator as a man of logic and reason, his portrayal of the physicians who attend to Roderick and Madeline reveals a profound distrust of those who subscribe to scientific or empirical thinking. When the narrator first encounters the physician of the Usher family, the physician "accosted [him] with trepidation" and the narrator notices, "His countenance…wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity" (Kennedy 129). This description paints the physician as incompetent and obtuse, helpless in the face of the Ushers' mysterious diseases, though his only job is to remedy them. Not only are the physicians in the story incapable: Roderick also confides in the narrator that he "had been led to his resolution" of entombing Madeline in the house because of "certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men" and the "remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family" (Kennedy 137). He implies that, "by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased," Madeline's physicians would have exhumed her body in order to satisfy their intellectual thirst (Kennedy 137). The narrator then

recalls the "sinister countenance" of the physician he met upon his arrival and agrees that Roderick's inclination is "at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution" (Kennedy 137). What was once merely an attack on the physicians' inability to reason out the mysteries of the Ushers' maladies becomes a full-fledged accusation of criminality and immorality. While these accusations are a bit far-reaching and histrionic, Poe seems more intent on attacking the concepts and structures of knowledge that scientists and empirical thinkers represent; in other words, he seeks to agitate our comfortable acceptance of the boundaries they so confidently draw and the facts they tout as inarguable fact. Though his stories are fraught with divisions and separations, Poe contends that the establishment of boundaries is ultimately unnecessary to the discernment of truth because boundaries are temporary and fragile; they are waiting to be crossed or challenged by exceptions. People draw boundaries all the time, and these boundaries cannot reasonably all distinguish truth from untruth, thus the construction of boundaries can serve to further conceal or disfigure the truth.

Poe is not alone in his protest against our culturally ingrained compulsion to establish boundaries to separate and thus understand dissimilar concepts. Jacques Derrida, another prominent thinker whose influence has revolutionized the fields of philosophy and literature, criticizes, in his masterpiece Of Grammatology, the over-usage of the copula "is" to represent the true, factual, immovable nature of ideas, concepts, and objects. Countering the over-simplification perpetrated by such an authoritative, absolute word, he writes, "*the hymen is* neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor the unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside" (Derrida llxxii). In confronting these dichotomous descriptive concepts, Derrida demonstrates the fallibility and unreliability of the boundaries we draw to categorize, organize, and clarify; he conveys that

boundaries accomplish the exact opposite of what we endeavor, failing to honor and fully capture the essence of objects and ideas and, instead, misrepresenting, reducing, and confining them in the mirage of concrete meaning. By publishing and circulating these ideas, Derrida pioneered the critical theories of deconstruction, a school of thought founded on a key concept – the multiplicity of meaning, especially multiple meanings that arise from "seemingly singular or stable meanings" that "give way to a ceaseless play of language" (Parker 87). Poe, Derrida, and deconstructionists do not necessarily seek to destroy pre-existing boundaries but to produce a "surplus of meaning and rhetoric" by challenging them and re-imagining and revitalizing our current body of knowledge in the absence of restricting boundaries (Parker 88). "Deconstruction," he summarizes, "seems to offer a way out of the closure of knowledge. Inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality…shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom." Echoing Poe's acknowledgement that we are often inclined to set down boundaries because the eradication of all boundaries would open us to a terrifying number, indeed, an infinite number of possibilities, Derrida continues, "The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom" (Derrida lxxvii).

We begin to discern that the terror inherent in Poe's story, as well as in a number of Poe's other stories, stems not from an anxiety about boundaries but more from the fear that, in truth, there are no real boundaries and all dichotomies actually exist on gradients with endless possibilities. This fear would be especially distressing to Americans in the late 19th Century who were responsible for establishing and governing a new country with a yet undetermined cultural identity. To institute and promote order, Americans needed to set down laws, and laws necessitate the existence of true black-and-white dichotomies, of distinct rights versus wrongs;

legislation and governance allow no room for gray areas. Poe strikes at the heart of this fear and bravely confronts the human dilemma of simultaneously needing separations to create and standardize meaning and casting boundaries aside to allow for and accept the multiplicity and flexibility of truth.

3. Perceptive Pets and Perceived Perniciousness in "The Black Cat"

Poe's "The Black Cat" presents us with the final confession of a man facing execution for the crime of murdering his wife. Given these special narrative circumstances and the fact that they are laid out for us at the very outset of the story, we immediately form judgments about the narrator's trustworthiness under the presumption that a dead man has no reason to lie. In one respect, our expectations are satisfied by the narrator's brusque, unabashed tone and the ease and willingness with which he incriminates himself in his own story. But how are we, as rational agents, to rely on the word of a man who killed his only earthly companion in cold blood? As his narrator recounts the events leading to his detention, Poe questions the perceived divide between man and beast, acknowledges the stifling power of the domestic space, and demonstrates the inextricability of hate from love. Unlike in some of his other short stories in which he depicts the struggle to separate "self" from "other," in "The Black Cat," Poe paints a portrait of a self divided, of a soul antagonizing itself with no regard for or discernible threat from others. Here again, the narrator's behaviors and rationales indicate some deeper mental affliction despite his relentless, increasingly desperate attempts to convince us of his sanity. His narration overflows with defensive predictions of our judgments, appeals to God's mercy, and sporadic manic rants. Finally, we wonder, if it is not condemnation by the law or by society that the narrator fears, what is his purpose for divulging the truth, for telling this final story? While the narrator's intentions remain murky, Poe's authorial intentions are clear – he again pushes us up against the limits and multiplicity of truth and the hazy boundaries between rationality and irrationality, sense and nonsense.

The first paragraph of the story arrests us with its candidness while also bombarding us with indispensible preliminary information about the narrator and his story. In the very first sentence, the narrator announces that he "neither expect[s] nor solicit[s] belief" for his "most wild, yet most homely" account (Kennedy 192). Ever the playful wordsmith, Poe uses "homely" to suggest the story's simplicity despite the "wild" events that unfold, but also emphasizes that the story takes place within the narrator's own home. While the question arises of why exactly he sets out to tell a story no one will believe, he informs us of the circumstances surrounding his recounting: "But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul" by "plac[ing] before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events" (Kennedy 192). Though he identifies these purposes as being of the same vein, there is something contradictory and suspicious about a personal confession that boasts objectivity and a lack of ulterior motives. Our suspicions are again alerted by the narrator's somewhat bitter remark, "Mad indeed would I be to expect [belief], in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence" (Kennedy 192). The inclusion of the word "indeed" suggests that the narrator has previously been accused of madness, but he mitigates this implication and maintains his reliability by agreeing with his accusers and acknowledging the outlandishness of his evidence. He continues to diminish himself to appeal to those who doubt him: "perhaps some intellect…more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own…will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (Kennedy 192). Ingeniously, he lists a number of admirable intellectual attributes with which we are inclined to identify and, through this surreptitious flattery, he compels us to do exactly as he suggests – to perceive the events of his story as commonplace and unremarkable and thereby less incriminating.

Interestingly, though he discloses to us that he is a convicted felon receiving the death sentence, he begins his story by describing the "docility and humanity of [his] disposition" and the "tenderness of [his] heart" (Kennedy 192). He briefly mentions that his softness once made him the "jest of [his] companions" but then abruptly begins to soliloquize about his lifelong love of animals (Kennedy 192). His indecorous transition suggests an aversion to any reminiscence of his youth, likely due to the bullying by his peers and an implicit lack of parental involvement. Poe's use of the passive voice in the sentence in which the narrator mentions, "I…was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets" suggests the narrator's intention to keep us focused on him instead of his parents and that their role in his early life was, like their presence in his narration, minimal and circumstantial. Though he does not directly identify his disappointment by the people in his life as the causal factor, the narrator finds solace and satisfaction in the "unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute" (Kennedy 192). That he specifically characterizes the love he receives from his pets as "unselfish and self-sacrificing" communicates that these are qualities he feels have always been lacking in his relationships with people. It is strange, then, that the narrator still refers to his beloved pets as "brutes," a word that places more emphasis on the animals' savagery and subordination and than their domestication and companionship (Kennedy 192).

Although the narrator distinguishes an insurmountable boundary between himself and other people, causing him to turn to animals for company, he also delineates a distinction between man and beast, a perception that betrays the belief that he has no respectable equal in life. What should strike us as a terribly lonely and pitiable existence actually gives rise to two major concerns. The first is that his solitude has led him to the notion that he is somehow excluded from, or above, the laws and natural rules of society and is therefore blameless for his

crime. The second arises from his explanation of his love for animals, which he suggests "goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere *Man*" (Kennedy 192). The cutting, resentful tone, made evident by the words "paltry," "gossamer," and "mere," again indicates the narrator's long-held grudges against the people in his life and his misanthropic conception of his superiority over all men and animals. However, these observations shroud the true threat underlying this sentence, which surfaces in his choice of the intentionally objective, indirect phrase "the heart of him" – the narrator takes no ownership of his own past, his current story, or his culpability and, consequently, has no understanding of the magnitude of his actions.

In the passages in which the narrator recounts his two heinous crimes, the murders of his cat Pluto and his wife, he uses a body of language that actively distances him from his actions and places the blame on other factors. He prefaces his retelling of Pluto's murder with a disclaimer: "…my general temperament and character – through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance – had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse" (Kennedy 193). Later in the same passage, he writes of his alcoholism, "My disease grew upon me – for what disease is like Alcohol!" (Kennedy 193). His methods of displacing blame onto his drinking problem are two-fold – in one way, he gives his alcoholism a character of its own, naming it with the capitalized designations of the "Fiend Intemperance" and "Alcohol" and thereby insinuating that it operates as a dangerously influential, almost autonomous agent. He also classifies his excessive drinking as a "disease," and though alcoholism may indicate an obsessive personality disorder or psychological lack of inhibition, he abuses this medicalization to paint himself as a helpless sufferer. In both of these descriptions of his alcoholism, the narrator

succeeds in establishing himself as a victim, a person to whom unfortunate things happen as opposed to a person who takes deliberate malevolent action.

Even when he recalls the abuse he inflicted upon his wife, the narrator's language diminishes the severity of his transgressions: "I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence" (Kennedy 193). Instead of plainly confessing that he verbally and physically abused his wife, he attempts to garner pity through expressing the pain he caused himself by inflicting injury upon his wife. He also uses the word "offered" to describe how he doled out the abuse, although to offer something implies that the receiver has the option to decline, an option his wife clearly did not have. Curiously, he then moves, with no transition, into a discussion of his mistreatment of his animals: "My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition" (Kennedy 193). The interjection "of course" initially reads as a sarcastic mockery of courtesy because, in the sentence directly preceding, he mentions his own suffering as a result of his wife's suffering. Thus, it would naturally follow that if his alcohol-fed anger led him to mistreat his wife, his closest and allegedly most valued human companion, "of course" his pets, mere animals, also felt the brunt of his rage.

If we are to believe, however, that the narrator has no intention to mock or deride the situation, it is also possible that the interjection is his way of catering to our expectations of what is socially acceptable, specifically our expectation that a man should value and consider the well being of his wife over that of his pets and feel more profound remorse for mistreating her. Accordingly, he does not use any emotionally charged language to further describe his abuse of his pets: "I not only neglected, but ill-used them" (Kennedy 193). However, strangely, he admits his favoritism towards Pluto for whom he "still retained sufficient regard to restrain [him] from

maltreating him" though he makes "no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog" (193). The narrator exhibits blatant speciesism by which he assigns more respect and importance to his cat, despite the fact that monkeys are more biologically and cognitively comparable to humans and dogs have long held the pedestal of "man's best friend." We might also make the observation that the narrator "retains sufficient regard" to exempt Pluto from his abuse and yet does not demonstrate at least the same level of deference towards his wife for whom, in line with his speciesism, he *should* feel the greatest respect and affection. And yet, given what we know about his history of disappointment by people, can we justly fault him for marginalizing his wife?

To be fair, the narrator never pledges his love for his wife; of his marriage he only confides, "I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind" (Kennedy 193). His description expresses no sentiments of respect or appreciation, much less love or adoration; the only knowledge we have of his wife for the entirety of the story is that her "disposition" is, if not compatible with, at least tolerable to the narrator, she generally makes an effort to please him, and she is an "uncomplaining wife…the most usual and the most patient of sufferers" (Kennedy 198). Her faithful companionship proves to be dispensable to the narrator at her first and only misstep – her protection of the cat from the narrator's axe blow – as he only views her action as an impingement of his power. We see that the narrator views his wife as another of his "domestic pets" with Poe's play on the word "domestic" to refer both to the taming of once feral animals and the traditional occupation of the domestic sphere – the home, the kitchen, the realm of child-rearing – by women. Because Pluto and his wife ultimately meet the same tragic fate at the hands of the narrator, this parallelism

contradicts our previous notions of the narrator's speciesism and replaces the theory with the idea that the feels no sense of attachment to or respect for any living creature but himself.

In his essay, "Creeping in the 'Mere': Catagenesis in Poe's 'Black Cat' and Gilman's 'Yellow Wallpaper,'" Niles Tomlinson, a professor in the Humanities Department of Georgetown University, attributes the narrator's contempt of animals to an intense fear of permeated boundaries. He identifies that this fear stems from a "dawning sense that the animal Other is pervasive, unlocatable, slippery, and most damaging, already domesticated/insinuated within the borders of an anthropocentric order that is ostensibly immune" (Tomlinson 232). While the narrator senses that this "contagious animality" has infringed upon the world's natural order, he also feels it has permeated "not only the walls of his home but also his sense of identity" (Tomlinson 233). These sentiments echo our observations of the narrator's speciesism, most clearly in Tomlinson's mention of a rigid "anthropocentric order," in that the narrator intuits an inherent power structure at the top of which humans reside. However, that his pets, mere lowly animals, could inspire in him such an untamable, indeed, downright animalistic rage submits him to their power, thereby contradicting and upsetting two inextricable components of his identity: his conception of his place in the grand order and his version of reality. We also find parallels between Tomlinson's claims and Poe's concerns about the origin of the true threat to humanity. In Poe's stories, the threat usually attacks from within boundaries – in the forms of walls and cognitive divisions between self and other – that his characters draw with the intention to keep others out; these threats almost always wield the element of surprise. Tomlinson identifies the same situation in "The Black Cat," referring to the "pervasive, unlocatable, slippery" nature of the cats in the story. Regardless of their stealth and quiet agility, the narrator's cats are only "already domesticated/insinuated" within his boundaries because he

welcomes them there, unknowingly and fueled by the want for intimacy. Tomlinson's analysis misses this crucial point – that the narrator, who plainly stakes his sense of identity on his relative power and control, is ultimately responsible for his own downfall. The narrator's denial of and complete negligence of his responsibility undermines his trustworthiness because, even directly prior to his execution for his crimes, his boundaries still prevent him from accepting the truth of his own story.

Though Poe obviously encourages us to constantly doubt and reassess the reliability of the narrator, he also uses the narrator's problematic testimony to demonstrate the fractured, conflicting nature of truth. The narrator's understated, gilded accounts of his murders exemplify the impassable chasm between the truth and any attempt at representing or recreating the truth. In other words, anyone who endeavors to retell a course of events as they occurred dooms him or herself to failure or fraud; in this way, we should never feel entirely comfortable affirming any narrator's reliability and veracity. In going about the task of distinguishing truth from fabrication in narratives, this story presents us with a special case in that we already know the bottom-line truth – the narrator brutally kills his cat and his wife and attempts to cover up both murders. From these hard facts, we are able to recognize instances in which the narrator euphemizes incriminating situations; however, we must also recognize that, though he is a master of deterring blame, the narrator never blatantly misreports the truth. His roundabout honesty rather complicates our definition of truth, complicates even our usage of the phrase "the truth" because, by demonstrating that there is more than one way of telling the same story, the narrator proves that truth is flexible, multiplicitous, and fraught with nuances, contradictions, and boundaries that separate different versions of truth.

The narrator infringes upon these boundaries by embodying so many dualities simultaneously. For someone so calculating and meticulous, he commits two undeniably mindless, impulsive acts of violence without any pre-meditation of how he might dispose of the evidence. Indeed, it is inconceivable how someone who was once "noted for the docility and humanity of [his] disposition" also held the potential for such cruelty, sociopathy, and inhumanity (Kennedy 192). The fact that he becomes evil does not disqualify the fact that he was once good; likewise, the fact that his crimes were committed brashly and sloppily does not discount the acute self-awareness and thoroughness with which he tells his story. The narrator demonstrates his awareness of these conflicting dualities within his personality in his treatise of the idea of "perverseness," the "unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (Kennedy 194). Whether or not we can relate to this sentiment, the narrator assures us "perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart" (Kennedy 194). Because of his inability to reconcile his guilt for harming a "creature which had once so loved [him]" and his "irritation" at the "evident dislike" on the part of the cat, the narrator becomes hopelessly entangled in his own emotions, causing him to lash out violently again (Kennedy 194). This failure to organize his thoughts, to compartmentalize them within clear, marked margins demonstrates his inability to recognize the mental and moral boundaries that he himself set down. He becomes incapable of distinguishing between love and hate, fury and indifference, morality and depravity, and, notably, confinement and freedom; after he murders his wife and the black cat disappears, he confides, "Once again I breathed as a freeman," temporarily neglecting the guilt that still confines him, heedless of his imminent detainment (Kennedy 199). Along the same vein of losing sight of one's own boundaries, the "longing of the soul to vex itself" indicates the self falsely recognizing itself as other and

attacking its own foundations; the dissolution of the boundary between self and other therefore explains the narrator's split embodiment of dichotomous attributes.

By showing us that incongruous truths can feasibly co-exist, Poe's careful and intricate characterization of his narrator forces us to confront our own preconceptions of truth. Can we part ways with the notion that there can be only one truth and concede that there always exist many versions of the truth, none of which adequately captures the core truth? Can we accept that all morally good individuals also have a propensity for evil? Can we reconcile ourselves with the fact that seemingly exclusive dichotomies, like good and evil, co-exist in the world and in people? And where are we to go from here if we accept these ideas as truths? The end of the story offers us misleading and inadequate answers to these questions. Even at the end of his recount, after the literal deconstruction of the wall concealing his wife's body and the figurative revelation of the truth, the narrator still blames the "hideous beast whose craft had seduced [him] into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (Kennedy 201). Curiously, however, he previously admits that it was his own "rabid desire to say something easily" (Kennedy 200) that keeps the policemen in his basement, his own "rage more than demoniacal" (Kennedy 198) that prompts him to kill his wife. Poe's choice of words – "rabid," "demoniacal," "hideous beast" – reveals the narrator's unconscious identification with the animal and perhaps also his unwitting acceptance of his own culpability. The concluding sentence, "I had walled the monster up within the tomb!," further evidences the narrator's reluctant acceptance of the truth – that he is the true "monster" (Kennedy 201). This reading of the conclusion raises the question then, what "tomb" confines the narrator? We realize that the narrator provides us with the answer to this question at the onset of his story when we consider that tombs customarily hold only one occupant; the narrator's isolation from others throughout

his life has imprisoned him, doomed him to a life led alone, transformed him from a docile and humane man into a monster. Indeed, where are we to go from these realizations, especially with the knowledge that the narrator himself is ensnared in time – unable to reconcile his past, uncomfortable in the limbo of the present, and cognizant of the fact that he has no future?

The narrator's battle with his demons, both preexisting and alcohol induced, represents man's susceptibility to sin and evil; however, we would be missing Poe's and his narrator's point entirely to view this story as an isolated case with extraordinary circumstances. The horror in the story lies not in the brutality and senseless violence, nor does it necessarily stem from the narrator's lack of remorse for his crimes; the true horror resides in the possibility that this story is, just as the narrator initially proclaims, "nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (Kennedy 192). Who of us has not been betrayed or disappointed by a trusted companion? Is it our place to pass judgment on the narrator's behaviors, which resulted from a common human experience, without knowing the depths of his anguish and simply because his decisions diverge from our own brand of rationality? Or, instead of seeking first to further scorn or ostracize the narrator, should we confront his story as a testimony of a tortured, isolated soul left to its own devices? Perhaps we have mistaken Poe's intentions all along, assuming he set out to write a sensational horror story when he actually endeavored to present us with the very real possibility that the narrator's madness is not a product of his own faulty cognition but a misrepresented casualty of a polarizing, hypocritical, and degenerate American society. Society, in this story, assumes the roles of judge, jury, and executioner, leaving the narrator no hope for empathy or exoneration, compelling him to tell his own story. Furthermore, Poe does not depict the narrator's descent into moral bankruptcy as an unnatural or exceptional case – indeed, his decisions to set the story in ordinary domestic homes and to leave his narrator

unnamed are no coincidence. The narrator has no name, no specific identity, and he leads, from an outsider's perspective, a perfectly unremarkable life because his story could easily be ours. Thus, the work we have done to separate ourselves from the narrator, to point out clear instances in which we would have acted or chosen differently than he did, to elevate ourselves as possessing higher morality has been for naught. Even if we fail to identify a shred of his narration to which we can even remotely relate, his burdens are our shared burdens because such tragedies are the marks of a precariously positioned and already failing society. Poe's depiction of one man's susceptibility to sin allegorizes the vulnerability of the society as a whole to succumbing to the influences of desire and instinct and neglecting the pillars of reason and order.

Conclusion

The one question that I have flirted with, led on, and refused to answer satisfactorily is the one I always knew I would return to, though I wanted to first provide its response with a sturdy foundation before testing its durability: *why madness?* Why does Poe choose to characterize his narrators and protagonists as madmen? He would have made my job decidedly easier if he had endowed his narrators with sound consciences and dependable applications of logic and reason, for half of the labor that went into this project entailed the distillation of fact from fiction in his dizzying, disorienting, and fanciful narratives. From the many imagined conversations I have had with Poe in the duration of this project, I finally feel as if I have come to understand his motives for depicting madness in its many forms. By forcing us into awareness of the countless boundaries that confine his characters – and confine us – and though we are reluctant to surrender our belief that the construction of barriers allows us to better understand and distinguish conflicting concepts, Poe finally gives a resonating and authoritative voice to the misunderstood and marginalized madman. Poe gives the madman a comprehensive history instead of a list of troublesome symptoms; he brings the outsider inside; he validates their versions of truth. In doing so, he breaks down the most threatening wall of all – that which separates us from our fellow men. If not for this purpose, what other fundamental motive inspires us tell our stories? Why else do we feel compelled to reach outside of ourselves, to explain our motives and actions and communicate through writing, confiding our most private fears, and sharing our most implicating experiences? Through his exploration of the fears of intimacy, isolation, death, and confinement, Poe seeks to build bridges between our singular experiences instead of walls, bridges that traverse the gaps and spaces that distract us from embracing our common humanity and destiny. Though it is easy to get lost in all the divisions and discrepancies

in his stories, Poe makes the point that it is just as easy to become likewise cowed by the divisions drawn in life. By demonstrating the unifying and equalizing power of our fears, he offers us a guiding light to accentuate points of connection between our individual stories and places in history rather than points of discordance. Poe shows us the world through the eyes of the most downtrodden, neglected, misjudged, and ostracized members of society to suggest that these points of connection should offer new beginnings – opportunities to rectify and reinvent society by identifying our past missteps, atoning for the damage inflicted upon individual lives, and allowing for a world governed, but not limited or permanently divided by boundaries.

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