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## **Prolepsis through Poe's Narrators: The Prophetic Demise of the Obsessive Protagonist**

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## Introduction – Poe, Cognitive Narratology, Horror, and Prolepsis

“Narrative always says less than it knows, but it often makes known more than it says.”

– Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*

**Poe**

Edgar Allan Poe was a pioneer of psychological fiction. His stories center around characters whose reliability is questionable and who are mentally troubled in some way. While many authors of horror fiction craft stories about fantastical monsters that have never been proven by science to exist, Poe crafted stories that truly invoke terror because their subject is the horror of the mind. While readers of other types of horror fiction can finish a story and step away from the monsters with little to no fear of being followed by them, readers of Poe cannot forget the tales they read so readily because the horror of the mind is ever present. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 43.4 million American adults in 2015 had been diagnosed with some type of mental illness, including but not limited to Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Major Depression, and Schizophrenia (“Health and Education”). If an American adult is not personally struggling with a mental disorder, then he or she has a high chance of encountering someone else who is. Although there were fewer diagnosed mental illnesses during Poe’s writing career – in fact, there were still disorders that had yet to be recognized – they existed. Many struggled, Poe and his characters included. Furthermore, Poe’s characters struggle in the way they do because of Poe’s own struggles. Author of *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft, writes, “Poe revealed his inner mind in his writings as have few authors in history. And what a mental chamber of terror that mind was! Horror piles on horror in his early (and later) tales; blood, unnatural lust, madness, death – always death – fill his pages and the ‘haunted palace’ of

his brain” (8). Poe crafted such horrific stories because of the haunted palace of his mind, and death commonly appeared in the haunted palace of his mind because it pervaded his life.

Death greatly shaped who Poe became. Erica Giammarco, author of “Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychological Profile,” traces this trend all the way back to when Poe was in the womb. Poe’s mother, Elizabeth, had a great financial burden and worked long, hard hours as an actress to alleviate that burden (Giammarco). Various studies, as listed in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, link a mother’s stress during pregnancy with the child’s development of mental illness later in life. Specifically, a mother’s stress during pregnancy affects the child’s hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which correlates with alcoholism, among other disorders (Giammarco). Therefore, Elizabeth Poe’s stress during pregnancy could have pre-disposed Poe to alcoholism. According to Tofoli, et al. in “Early Life Stress,” Elizabeth’s stress also could have pre-disposed Poe to mood disorders, since the HPA axis is correlated with disorders such as Depression, Bi-polar, Anxiety, etc. (*Psychology and Neuroscience*). Various studies, once again listed in the journal, *Personality and Individual Differences*, link parents’ financial instability and tendency to move homes with depression, and both describe Poe’s family after his birth (Giammarco). Furthermore, the death of a child’s mother before the age of nine greatly increases the child’s chances of depression (Tofoli, et al.), and Poe was only two years old when Elizabeth passed away. In “Environment and Vulnerability,” O. Agid, et al. argue that, when a child loses a parent at a young age, the child is prone to greater depression if other loved ones die later in life (164). Poe not only experienced the deaths of many loved ones following the death of his mother, but he was also forced to be apart from loved ones when they were still alive, which also impacted his depression (Agid, et al. 165). Essentially, Poe’s life

circumstances pre-disposed him to depression, aggravated his depression, and may well have encouraged him to seek solace from alcohol.

Poe's stories are best understood with knowledge of his life, as supported by Robert Scholes statement in *The Nature of Narrative*:

Meaning, in a work of narrative art, is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the 'real' world, the apprehendable universe. When we say we 'understand' a narrative we mean that we have found a satisfactory relationship or set of relationships between these two worlds...[t]o understand a literary work, then, we must first attempt to bring our own view of reality into as close an alignment as possible with the prevailing view in the time of the work's composition. (82-83)

A relationship exists between the world in Poe's stories and the world in which Poe lived. The meaning of Poe's stories lies within that relationship. Even if Poe did not shape his characters and their world to replicate his own, his writing was still somewhat limited by what he knew and understood, and much of what he knew was sadness. Poe wrote the following in a letter shortly before his death in 1849: "My sadness is unaccountable, and this makes me the more sad. I am full of dark forebodings. Nothing cheers or comforts me. My life seems wasted – the future looks a dreary blank: but I will struggle on and 'hope against hope'" (qtd. in Pruette 398). Poe wrote that his sadness was unaccountable, although examining his life makes clear the reasons for his sadness. In another letter earlier in his life, Poe wrote, "it was my crime to have no one on Earth who cared for me, or loved me" (qtd. in Wagenknecht 66). There were many people, specifically women, who loved Poe. Unfortunately, Poe was separated from them by their

deaths. These many deaths might have been the causes of his sadness, and they began occurring soon after his birth.

When his mother, Elizabeth, died in 1811, she left him with mere imaginations of what growing up with her would have been like. He valued what few tangible connections to his mother he had. For instance, before her death, his mother sketched the Boston Harbor and included a heartfelt note for Poe. He must have kept this piece of artwork most of his life because it is currently available to view as a part of the Ingram Collection at the University of Virginia (Wagenknecht 35). He also took advantage of opportunities to praise his mother and her work. In 1845, Poe responded to evangelical prejudice against acting with the following heartfelt words: “The writer of this article is himself the son of an actress – and no earl was ever prouder of his earldom than he of his descent from a woman who, although well born, hesitated not to consecrate to the drama her brief career of genius and beauty” (qtd. in Wagenknecht 50). In “A Psycho-Analytical Study of Edgar Allan Poe,” Lorine Pruett notes that Poe wrote highly about so many women that a critic cannot definitively say which ones impacted him most (*The American Journal of Psychology*). However, because of Attachment Theory, a critic can argue that Poe’s mother impacted him the most based on how highly he wrote about those women.

The premise of Attachment Theory is that humans are relational, and the most important relationship during children’s development is that of the children with their mothers. Katherine Péloquin, et al. discuss in their article “Sexuality Examined” how a child’s “sense of self-worth and lovability, and positive expectations of others” (562) stem from the positive, persistent care of those with whom the child becomes attached. However, if those with whom the child becomes attached are inconsistent and negligent, ignoring the physical and emotional needs of the child, then the child will likely have a negative view of self and others (Péloquin, et al. 562). The child-

mother relationship not only directly affects children's development, but it also shapes how children interact in other relationships, particularly romantic relationships (Snyder, et al. 710). Péloquin, et al. further discuss how, in adulthood, the attachments one formed as a child directly correlate with "regulating emotions and behaviors in the context of romantic relationships" (562). Possible manifestations of insecure attachments in childhood include anxiety and avoidance. One might enter romantic relationships with a constant, looming anxiety of abandonment, or one might completely avoid entering such relationships out of fear of intimacy or dependence. Another possibility is that the romantic partner or spouse becomes the primary attachment figure (Péloquin 562). Even though Elizabeth died before Poe could develop a true relationship with her, he was attached to a positive idea of her. He then projected that positive idea of his deceased mother onto other women with whom he built true relationships (Snyder, et al. 710). Every time one of the women in Poe's life died, he lost his mother-image again.

In addition, Poe's biological father, David Poe Jr., died shortly after Elizabeth's death. Poe moved in and was raised by Mr. and Mrs. John Allan (Wagenknecht 46). Poe's relationship with his foster father was tempestuous through the years. His relationship with his foster mother, Frances Allan, was better, but she did not fulfill his maternal craving (Pruette). Instead of inviting his young friends to his home, he opted to visit their homes (Pruette). In so doing, he developed a relationship with one of his friend's mothers, Mrs. Stannard. Mrs. Stannard was sympathetic to Poe's situation and always acted welcoming towards him (Wagenknecht 85). Poe did not get to enjoy the relationship for long; she died shortly after their meeting. Poe was distressed for some time after Mrs. Stannard's death. John Mackenzie, a life-long friend of Poe's, observed, "I never saw in him as a boy or man a sign of morbidness or melancholy; unless it was when Mrs. Stannard died, when he appeared for some time grieving and depressed" (qtd. in



Wagenknecht 51). For months afterward, his grief led him by moonlight to her graveside, where he mourned the loss of his second mother-image (Pruette). In addition to the deaths of his mother and Mrs. Stannard, Poe helplessly experienced the loss of his first love, S. Elmira Royster. Poe and Royster became engaged, but the engagement fell through after Poe entered The University of Virginia in 1826 and failed to hear from his fiancée again. Poe did not discover until a year later, when Royster was married to another man, the reason for her lack of communication. Royster's father did not approve of the relationship between his daughter and Poe, consequently hiding all of Poe's letters to Royster until she moved on (Pruette).

Royster's father's sabotage did not improve Poe's negative view of the men in his life, but the worst influence on that negative view was Poe's foster father, John Allan. According to the study "Predictors of Father-Child and Mother-Child Attachment," performed by Jared P. Benware, "fathers who engaged in positive parenting behaviors...had no effect on attachment security. On the other hand, when fathers did not engage in these forms of parenting, father involvement was detrimental to father-child attachment security" (24). Poe wrote about his biological mother based on the many descriptions of her shared by those who knew her (Morrison 45). He had tangible connections to her, specifically in the form of a sketch and accompanying letter. He did not seem to know much, if any, about his biological father, nor did Poe claim to have any tangible connections to him. Consequently, Poe had a more positive view of mother-figures from the beginning, which was only enforced by the women who entered his life. Those women died (his mother and Mrs. Stannard), or were removed from his life (S. Elmira Royster) before Poe detected fault in their character significant enough to tarnish his positive view. In contrast, the men in his life only drove more distance between Poe and a

positive father-image. Poe claimed those men never assisted him when he was in need, and instead ridiculed him:

some with a civil sneer, others with brutal, outspoken rudeness...But women do not argue logically, as to one's merits or demerits; - they follow certain heart instincts more profoundly sometimes than the deductions of philosophy, and so (God eternally bless them!), they have been angels of mercy to me, and have tenderly led me from the verge of ruin, while men stood aloof and mocked. (qtd. in Wagenknecht 174)

Royster's father was placed into this category when he prevented his daughter and Poe's relationship to develop; however, if Royster's father caused Poe to doubt the possibility of having a positive father-image, then John Allan destroyed all hope.

Poe was not as connected with Mrs. Allan as he was with other women in his life, but he still cared deeply for her (Wagenknecht 117). Therefore, Allan's infidelities and subsequent children offended Poe (Wagenknecht 90). Furthermore, Allan refused to help Poe numerous times when he was in dire need. Poe began classes at the University of Virginia in 1826 (Wagenknecht 97), but he did not finish his degree. Despite the rumors of Poe's drinking and gambling while enrolled at UVA, his record at the school proves no such involvement. Regardless, Allan refused to pay Poe's bills, thus preventing Poe from returning to school (Wagenknecht 109). In 1827, Poe enlisted in the Army (Wagenknecht 128). He wrote two letters to Allan after his enlistment; both were met with no reply. Allan finally responded to Poe after Mrs. Allan's death, at which time Poe sought to be discharged from the Army and obtain a recommendation from Allan for an appointment at West Point (Wagenknecht 133). Poe was discharged from the Army in 1829 (Wagenknecht 135), and did, in fact, obtain a letter of recommendation from Allan. However, Allan would provide Poe with nothing else, thus sending

him to West Point in 1830 without money to cover room, board, or books (Wagenknecht 130). In 1831, Poe left West Point, claiming his failure to be a result of Allan's neglect; in response, Allan stated, "I do not think the boy has one good quality" (qtd. in Wagenknecht 171-2). Poe attempted to maintain contact with Allan through letters, but the letters, at times desperate, went unanswered (Wagenknecht (188-91, 95). There are no documented attempts of contact between Poe and Allan in the final years of Allan's life; their foster-father, son relationship simply ceased to exist. Meanwhile, Poe continued to meet and build relationships with mother-images, then suffer heartbreak as they were taken from him.

After leaving West Point, Poe moved to Baltimore and into the home of Mrs. Clemm, the woman who would soon be his mother-in-law (Wageknecht 186). In 1835, Poe moved out of Mrs. Clemm's home to join the staff of the *Messenger* in Richmond, Virginia. He maintained contact with the Clemms, partly because he was in love with his second cousin, Mrs. Clemm's daughter, Virginia (Wageknecht 212). Poe sent Mrs. Clemm money along with his letters while working for the *Messenger*; one letter contained the following confession: "I love, you know, I love Virginia passionately devotedly. I cannot express in words the fervent devotion I feel towards my little cousin – my own darling...I have been dreaming every day and night since of the rapture I should feel in [seeing] my only friends – all I love on earth with me there; the pride I would take in making you both comfort[table] and in calling her my wife" (qtd. in Wageknecht 219, 223). Poe's wish was granted. In 1836, when he was twenty-six and she was only thirteen, Poe married Virginia. They continued living with Mrs. Clemm, who accepted Poe into the family as if he were her own son: "The attachment between him and his aunt was always very strong, she laboring and suffering for him as would a mother for an only son...the maternal care and devotion of Mrs. Clemm offered him a refuge and safety from the troubles and disapproval of the

outside world” (Quinn 252). Additionally, Poe felt more connected to his biological mother because of Virginia’s musical inclinations. Not only was Virginia beautiful inwardly and outwardly, but she also sang, which caused Poe to associate her with his mother, the performer (Quinn 252). Poe had a loving mother-image and an adoring young wife. For a short time, his life was good.

Poe was in the habit of caring for Virginia before their marriage, as he sent money along with his letters (Wagenknecht 219). He continued to earn money throughout their marriage by publishing and re-publishing his stories. Even though Poe and Virginia lived with Mrs. Clemm, Poe might have felt responsibility to care for Virginia since he was both the man of the house and significantly older than his wife. While the spouse of one with insecure attachments often becomes the primary attachment figure, the one with insecure attachments might assume the role of the caregiver in the romantic relationship. Phillip R. Shaver and R. Chris Fraley’s definition of *affectional bonds*, as used in the article “Attachment Theory and Caregiving,” is applicable to Poe’s relationship to Virginia, considering Poe’s response to Virginia’s death. An affectional bond occurs when two people “recognize each other as uniquely important; monitor each other’s whereabouts; have some understanding of each other’s goals, intentions, and desires...have experienced strong emotions in relation to each other; and would be...lost without each other” (Shaver and Fraley 111). These bonds often occur between a parent and a child, in which case the parent is motivated to caregiving out of interest for the child as opposed to self-interest (Shaver and Fraley 109). If Poe and Virginia had an affectional bond, and Poe assumed the role of caregiver in their marriage, then Poe might have felt like he failed as Virginia’s caregiver.

While Poe had occasional bouts of drinking throughout his life, alcohol did not become a detriment to his health until Virginia became sick. After marrying Virginia, Poe wrote in a letter

to a friend, “I never was in the habit of intoxication...But it is not quite four years since I have abandoned every kind of alcoholic drink...My sole drink is water” (qtd. in Quinn 303). This claim is supported by guests who boarded at Mrs. Clemm’s house and testified to Poe’s sobriety and dedication to his authorship (Quinn 267). Then Virginia became sick. In 1842, Virginia broke a blood vessel while singing at home, and her health fluctuated until her death (Quinn 347). Poe was severely distraught over his wife’s sickness, and he turned to alcohol to alleviate his distress. Poe acknowledged his coping mechanism in the following letter to a friend:

Six years ago, a wife whom I loved as no man ever loved before, ruptured a blood-vessel in singing. Her life was despaired of. I took leave of her forever & underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially and I again hoped. At the end of a year the vessel broke again – I went through precisely the same scene. Again in about a year afterward. Then again – again – again & even once again at varying intervals. Each time I felt all the agonies of her death – and at each accession of the disorder I loved her more dearly and clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I became constitutionally sensitive – nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity. (qtd. in Wagenknecht 39)

When Virginia died in January 1847, Poe had a mental breakdown and was bed-ridden, completely dependent upon Mrs. Clemm (Quinn 527-28). During Poe’s recovery, Mrs. Clemm noted that he could not “bear stimulants or tonics, without producing insanity” (qtd. in Quinn 528). By August 1847, Poe was well enough to take leave of Mrs. Clemm’s house and attempt to reestablish his literary career (Quinn 531).

Poe's unstable mental state is evidenced by his love affair with Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman in 1848. Poe pursued Whitman, who flirted with the idea of a relationship with Poe. However, when he proposed, she rejected him. After this rejection, Poe attempted suicide by consuming large amounts of laudanum. Mrs. Whitman accepted Poe's proposal during his recovery from the attempted suicide, then broke it off once she deemed Poe recovered (Quinn 572, 79). Poe remained alive physically, but mentally, he was as good as dead. He continued to seek solace from alcohol. Thomas W. White, a friend of Poe's, wrote to him and advised, "Separate yourself from the bottle, and bottle companions... If you should come to Richmond again, and again should be an assistant in my office, it must be expressly understood by us that all engagements on my part would be dissolved, the moment you get drunk. No man is safe who drinks before breakfast! No man can do so, and attend to business properly (qtd. in Fisher 5). Poe did not heed White's advice. Shortly afterward, John Sartain, the editor of *Union Magazine*, found Poe delirious on the streets of Baltimore. Poe pleaded with Sartain to save him from the women who were allegedly trying to attack him (Quinn 616). Another biographer confirms this account, adding that Poe begged Sartain to shave his mustache as a disguise from the women trying to attack him (Wagenknecht 19-20). Poe was admitted to a local hospital and remained in a similar mental state until his death. One friend, John J. Moran, wrote to Mrs. Clemm and detailed his final exchange with Poe: "I told him I hope that in a few days he would be able to enjoy the society of his friends here and I would be most happy to contribute in every possible way to his ease and comfort. At this he broke out with much energy, and said the best thing a friend could do would be to blow out his brains with a pistol... he said, 'Lord, help my poor soul!' and expired" (qtd. in Fisher 72). Mrs. Clemm loved Poe and desired to help him until his

death. Regardless, Poe died alone in Baltimore on October 7, 1849, without his last remaining mother-image present.

Poe caught glimpses throughout his life of the motherly affection he so deeply craved, but that craving was never fully satisfied. The more mother-images he lost, the worse his depression became. Towards the end of his life, the loss of significant women pushed him to an unhealthy consumption of alcohol, which further aggravated his depression and, eventually, his mental instability. However, these unfortunate events positively inspired his writing. Poe's tormented soul and unobtained passions enabled him to create characters, specifically narrators, who were equally tormented and passionate. According to James W. Gargano, in "The Question of Poe's Narrators," Poe had an adept understanding of his narrator's struggles, even though their struggles were distinct from his own: "[Poe] is a serious artist who explores the neuroses of his characters with probing intelligence. He permits his narrator to revel and flounder into torment, but he sees beyond the torment to its causes" (180-81). An understanding of Poe's life is vital to a complete understanding of his characters.

### **Cognitive Narratology**

Cognitive narratology, a subset of narrative theory, is an appropriate lens through which to read Poe's stories because of the insight it provides into Poe and his characters. Narrative theory requires a person to read a story and analyze the characters' situations, as well as how the characters respond to and process those situations. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* explains the value of narrative because "[r]ather than focus on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people- and of what it is like for them to experience what happened...Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (Herman 3). The characters in a narrative are relatable, in

some way, to readers in real life because they are based on humanity. The ability to analyze how the characters respond to time, process, and change is important because the analysis reveals that humanity responds a certain way. *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* further explains that “[w]e organize our experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (Herman 8). In addition to revealing more about how humanity responds, narrative also reveals more about how humanity processes situations. People automatically arrange their memories into narrative form. When someone recalls a memory, this memory appears like the scene from a narrative would appear. When someone recounts a memory to another person, the memory is explained like the plot from a narrative would be. When one reads the retrospective account of a first-person narrator, such as Poe’s narrators, it is structurally similar to how one recounts past occurrences to himself or others. In *Narrative: The Basics*, Thomas Bronwen writes that narrative “is perceived as basic to who we are as human beings...It is also crucial to how we make sense of the random things and experiences we encounter in our daily lives, helping us to give shape and meaning to them” (4). Not only is narrative inescapable, but it is vital. It is more difficult to understand memories if one does not arrange them into narrative form. This arrangement allows the memories to be clearer, as well as to be connected more easily with separate but relevant memories; a person who arranges memories in narrative form can notice the similarities between situations. Narrative allows a person to understand himself and others better and more easily identify the cause and effect. This theory is cognitive narratology.

Cognitive narratology is psychological in that it argues that people can understand and empathize with others more if they read narratives (Bronwen 4). Characters’ experiences are relatable to real experiences. Characters’ thoughts, feelings, and actions in regard to those



experiences are reflective of real thoughts, feelings, and actions. Therefore, reading about these characters provides either deeper understanding of oneself, or greater empathy for others (Bronwen 4). Authors Julie Rivken and Michael Ryan go as far as to say that “the world we live in is shaped as much by language as by knowledge of perception...knowledge and perception always occur through the mediation of language. We would not be able to know anything if we were not able to order the world linguistically in certain ways” (55). In other words, Rivken and Ryan believe there is no knowledge without narrative. This viewpoint might be extreme, but the basis of it is true; because of its emotive nature, narrative is key in understanding experiences and applying that understanding to life (Bertens 17).

Cognitive narratology is appropriate when reading Poe’s stories because of his narrators’ mental instability. Each narrator in the stories on which this thesis focuses are struggling from mental illness and, consequently, mental instability. This instability is more prevalent now than it was when the stories were written since more mental illnesses are recognized and more people have been diagnosed with them (“Health and Education”). While readers can definitely relate to Poe’s narrators’ thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to their mental experiences, or apply what they learn from these characters to others in life, readers might question how relatable the narrators’ actual experiences are because of their horrific nature. However, this horrific nature emphasizes the narrator’s experiences more through defamiliarization, a process wherein one re-examines something to which he is de-sensitized.

## **Horror**

Poe’s horrific stories, specifically “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Black Cat,” defamiliarize the situations in which the narrators struggle with mental instability, causing the readers to re-examine the aspects of mental illness to which

they are de-sensitized. Tzvetan Todorov writes in “The Typology of Detective Fiction” that an important aspect of criticism is noting what a story is in that moment as well as what the story inspires in the future (226). Some of Poe’s stories inspired horror fiction in future years; a prerequisite for that inspiration is that Poe’s stories themselves are horror fiction. Poe’s stories are classified as a part of the horror genre because of the effect they evoke in the reader (Carroll 14). Noel Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* discusses both the reason certain works are classified as horror, and why humanity is inclined to read horror. Since horror is classified as such because of the effect it evokes in the reader, and it is against human instinct to gravitate towards horrific situations, the fact that so many are inclined to read horror is a paradox of the heart (Carroll 161). The word *horror* is derived from the French word meaning “to bristle or to shudder” (Carroll 24) and the Latin word meaning “to stand on end or to bristle” (Carroll 24). The source of such an effect in horror fiction is different from the monster in fairytales or mythological tales. In fairy tales, for instance, monsters are typical; the characters might respond adversely to certain monsters, but overall, they are not in the least frightened to encounter a monster. In contrast, the monsters in horror fiction are atypical. The monster in Poe’s stories is mental illness. The characters do not expect this monster, and they always respond adversely to it because it is abnormal and appears threatening (Carroll 16). Although instinct generally necessitates running away from the abnormal and the threatening, readers of horror run towards it.

Perhaps one reason readers run towards horror is that the readers’ emotions mirror those of the characters, which is not always the case with other genres. Readers and characters alike recognize the monsters as abnormal and threatening, and they share the horrified emotion that is caused by those monsters. Readers and characters do not always share emotions. For instance, if

a bad character experiences defeat, he is not exultant in that defeat although readers might be. If a character experiences jealousy, readers are more than likely not also jealous. But with horror, the characters and readers are both caught up in fear and suspense throughout the story (Carroll 18). They both fight to know what the monster is and how it can be overcome. That knowledge is another shared component between readers and characters; the readers do not often know the intimate details of the monster before the characters do, so they are both learning together. In horror, knowledge is a predominant theme (Carroll 127). Though knowledge is a theme in other genres as well, its role in horror is different because horror “has at the center of it something which is given as in principle unknowable” (Carroll 182).

In Poe’s stories, the monster, mental illness, manifests itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes the characters are aware of what they are fighting, but they do not know how to overcome it. Other times, the characters are still trying to identify what they are fighting, so they are not even close to overcoming it. Although there is currently more known about mental illness than ever before, it still “has at the center of it something which is given as in principle unknowable” (Carroll 182). Mental health experts can treat the symptoms of mental illness now, but the root cause is still a mystery. When Poe wrote his horrific stories, there was even less known about mental illness. His characters and readers share the emotions elicited by the stories, as well as the desire to know what causes them. So did Poe.

Poe and his characters identified with one another, not through duplicating situations, but through similar responses to those types of situations. *Character-identification* is a term that can refer to literature, movies, or even music. Its definition is just as broad as its context, for character-identification can mean many different things. In reference to Poe, it means that Poe was aware of how his narrators viewed situations, and related to how they responded to those

situations. Not only did Poe relate to how they responded, but those responses were influenced by how Poe was responding to the horrors of his own mind, a theory that will be further discussed in later chapters. According to *The Mind and Its Stories* by Patrick Colm Hogan, an author's past or current emotions often forge their way into fiction, even if only slightly. A person's experiences leave evidence in his mind. If a character undergoes a similar experience, the evidence of that person's experience rises to the surface and causes the person to re-live the corresponding emotions. This effect is more than just the person remembering he once felt those emotions; the person does, in fact, feel the emotions again (Locana qtd. in Hogan 52). This effect redefines how a person responds to new experiences, even literary experiences (Hogan 62). This concept also applies to authors and their own stories (Hogan 69). If Poe's characters caused him to re-live the emotions of certain experiences, thus causing him to redefine how he responded to new experiences, it is plausible to believe that redefined way of responding translated to his characters.

Though Poe may not have realized what he was doing, his narratives caused him to re-live the emotions of certain experiences, and possibly to understand himself better. As stated earlier, narrative "is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (*Cambridge Companion* 3). Furthermore, narrative causes one to re-examine that to which he may have become desensitized; this process is de-familiarization. Hans Bertens states in *Literary Theory* that "defamiliarization works by way of contrast, of difference" (36). Poe and his characters shared emotions and the way in which they responded to situations, but those situations were in contrast to one another. Instead of Poe's characters' mental illnesses portrayed in mundane situations that occur in day-to-day life, the illnesses are portrayed in horrific situations that reverse desensitization. According to Shklovsky, this reversal of desensitization is

the purpose of art: “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life...[t]he purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (qtd. in Bertens 29). Poe might have understood himself better through the reversal of desensitization caused by his stories. However, he never understood himself well enough to overcome the monster of mental illness which he faced.

### **Prolepsis**

A cognitive narratological examination of Poe’s horrific stories, specifically “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Black Cat,” reveals that each of the narrators is obsessed with something within their stories. Furthermore, their mental instability caused by mental illness only aggravates the obsessions. As stated earlier, Poe was obsessed with the loss of significant women in his life. Poe’s life was filled with the loss of female figures, who inspired much of his writing. In 1848, one year after Virginia’s death, Poe published the following in *Graham’s Magazine*:

If any ambitious man have a fancy to revolutionize, at one effort, the universal world of human thought, human opinion, and human sentiment, the opportunity is his own—the road to immortal renown lies straight, open, and unencumbered before him. All that he has to do is to write and publish a very little book. Its title should be simple—a few plain words “My Heart Laid Bare.” . . . But to write it—there is the rub. No man dare write it. No man ever will dare write it. No man could write it, even if he dared. The paper would shrivel and blaze at every touch of the fiery pen. (qtd. in Thomas 94-95)

Despite Poe’s claim that no man could ever write such an account, James W. Thomas, in “My Heart Laid Bare,” theorizes that Poe did write it over the course of many stories and poems (95). As noted earlier, Poe identified with his characters in that he was aware of how they viewed

situations and related to how they responded to those situations. Furthermore, Poe's re-defined way of responding to situations translated to his characters. Therefore, his narrators' obsessions throughout their stories and how they dealt with those obsessions is comparable to how Poe dealt with his obsession of the loss of women in his life – that is, not very well. The narrators in “The Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Black Cat,” are ultimately destroyed by their obsessions, just as Poe was ultimately destroyed by his. Furthermore, the fact that Poe would be destroyed by his obsession was evident before it occurred because of the use of prolepsis.

Poe utilized the literary technique, prolepsis, throughout his narratives. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette defines prolepsis as “any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later” (40). In other words, prolepsis is when one event predicts a future event. Genette further discusses prolepsis and notes that “the ‘first-person’ narrative lends itself better than any other to anticipation, by the very fact of its avowedly retrospective character, which authorizes the narrator to allude to the future and in particular to his present situation, for these to some extent form part of his role” (67). Poe's narratives lend themselves more to prolepsis because they are narrated in first-person. Some might question the reliability of first-person narration in this case because the narrators are mentally unstable. However, the fact that the first-person narrators are mentally unstable is revelatory of Poe's mental state, therefore benefitting the argument of this thesis. As will be further discussed, one commonality between Poe and his narrators is that they many suffered from mental illness – Poe, specifically, from depression. A second commonality is that Poe and his narrators are all obsessed with something from within their narratives, and their mental illnesses only aggravated these obsessions. The fact that Poe's re-defined way of responding to

situations translated to his narrators is significant here because, if they responded to their obsessions by continually pursuing them to the point of being destroyed, then so did Poe. His narrators' obsessions ultimately led to their destructions, and those events predicted Poe's own destruction because of his own obsession. Therefore, the narrators' obsessions and their consequential demise is prolepsis.

This chapter of the thesis examined Poe's life, argued that his mental instability was a result of his obsession of the loss of women in his life, and argued that that obsession caused his demise. The following four chapters will focus on the narrators in "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat" respectively. These chapters will argue first that the narrators are psychologically disturbed and mentally unstable, thus causing them to be obsessive about a person or thing within the story. Secondly, these chapters will argue that the narrators' demises are a direct result of their obsessions. Finally, these chapters will compare the narrators' demises with Poe's to demonstrate the similarities and argue that prolepsis can be seen in Poe's narrators to predict Poe's end. Katherine E. MacDuffie and Timothy J. Strauman write in "Understanding Our Own Biology" that because of the way mental illness is often portrayed, many view it as a destiny instead of something which can be treated. MacDuffie and Strauman propose that scientific literature can be altered to "encourage agency, rather than destiny" among those suffering from mental illness, thus changing "expectations and improv[ing] outcomes in the treatment of psychiatric disorders" (*Clinical Psychology*). According to cognitive narratological theory, scientific literature, among other types of literature, can have a positive impact on those who struggle with mental illness. If after entertaining the concepts discussed in this thesis readers accept them as belief, they can then use these concepts to further examine literature through a cognitive narratological lens with the intention of better

understanding themselves and others and encourage those struggling with mental illness to seek help.



## Chapter One – The Obsessive Protagonist in “Ligeia”

“Don’t grieve. Anything you lose comes around in another form.”

- Jalaluddin Mevlana Rumi

Poe’s “Ligeia” was published in the *Baltimore American Museum* in 1838 (Sova 98). The story was re-published in both *New York World* and *Broadway Journal* in 1845 (Sova 98). The most significant revision to “Ligeia” in subsequent publications was the poem “The Conqueror Worm,” included under the pretense of being written by Ligeia, the narrator’s first and most beloved wife, upon her deathbed. This chapter will examine the narrator’s obsession with Ligeia and discuss how the opium addition he develops after her death aggravates his obsession and, consequently, impacts his hallucinations. The opium would have caused the narrator to hallucinate regardless of his emotional state, but his obsession with Ligeia and his inability to overcome his grief prompt very specific hallucinations; ultimately, the narrator sees what his mind so desperately wants him to see. This chapter will also examine the utilization of prolepsis through the inclusion of “The Conqueror Worm.” According to Dawn B. Sova in *A Critical Companion*, this poem “represents death as a conqueror, a victor over humankind’s struggle to live and survive. Despite all efforts to overcome the conqueror worm [death], humans are the tragic players in the struggle in which death is always triumphant” (50). The narrator in “Ligeia” is not ultimately destroyed; his obsession only leads him to a point of complete mental instability, which is interesting considering the story was written before Virginia’s diagnosis and death in 1847. However, the inclusion of the “The Conqueror Worm” following Virginia’s diagnosis demonstrates a change in Poe’s thought process, since the main theme of “The Conqueror Worm” is that death ultimately conquers all of humanity. Ligeia supposedly writes this poem and instructs the narrator to read it aloud prior to her death. The ending of the poem in

which humankind is subject to death despite the fight against it foreshadows the end of “Ligeia.” The narrator can neither conquer death nor overcome the loss of his wife; this lostness, existential despair, and hopelessness consume him. Furthermore, the ending of the poem (lines 33-40) foreshadows the end of Poe. He can neither conquer death before it takes Virginia, nor can he overcome the many losses of the significant female figures in his life.

The narrator appears obsessed with Ligeia from the beginning of the story, although he struggles to remember basic details about who Ligeia was as a person. The narrator’s struggle mirrors Poe’s struggle to know more details about his mother, who died in 1811 when he was a child. The narrator initially claims, “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia...my memory is feeble through much suffering” (256). He cannot remember Ligeia’s family, nor can he remember her paternal name; however, he distinctly recalls “her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language” (256). Similarly, Poe did not know much about his mother. Claudia C. Morrison notes in “Poe’s Characters as Self-Portraits” that the most vivid memory he had of her was most likely her death from tubercular illness in 1811. Poe was present while his mother died of tubercular illness, which is considered a traumatic event by many child psychologists (Morrison 46). Though he did not know her personally for long, Poe garnered from play programs and critics’ descriptions that his mother was beautiful and talented as both an actress and a singer (Wagenknecht 50). Marita Nadal writes in “Trauma and the Uncanny” that trauma translates into “compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood that saturate Western cultural life” (179). If the trauma of Poe losing his mother at a young age impacted his stories, then his conception of her as a beautiful and talented woman impacted his stories as well. Nadal further argues that trauma translates into

compelling stories because it never ceases to haunt those who experienced the trauma, especially if the experience remains unprocessed (180-81). As the memories of Poe's mother, though they be few, were ever present with Poe, so the memories of Ligeia were ever present with the narrator. The narrator's obsession with Ligeia is symptomatic of a loss in which "the process of mourning has failed" (Nadal 182). If the process of mourning had not failed the narrator, or if the narrator had not prevented the process from working, then he would be able to move forward without constantly harping on his memory of Ligeia. This obsession is only worsened by the narrator's growing addiction to opium.

The narrator compares Ligeia's beauty to "the radiance of an opium-dream" (257), but he does not mention using opium until after Ligeia's death. Since he is transparent about his opium use following her death, the narrator probably does not use opium preceding her death. Instead, it becomes a coping mechanism. In "Implementation and Evaluation of Brief Depression and Anxiety Screening," Anna Christina Thomas and colleagues propose that drug-abusers should undergo a depression and anxiety screening prior to treatment. Because depression and anxiety are contributing factors for many drug-abusers, the results of such a screening could lead to a more specific, more effective treatment (303). That depression is a contributing factor for drug-abusers is supported by "Dysfunctional Attitudes," written by Wang Cui-Yan and colleagues. They note that drug-abuse is often a response to *learned helplessness*, which "occurs when, after experiencing many failures, an individual feels helpless and loses confidence, and has a greater behavioral tendency toward quitting or ceasing to try" (270). The narrator tries to save Ligeia but fails; consequently, he feels helpless, loses confidence, and is not compelled to try in his second marriage. While learned helplessness is rarely the cause of drug abuse in and of itself, it is linked to drug abuse when coupled with a *dysfunctional attitude*, which distorts a person's view of his

circumstances and subsequent future, often leading to depression (270). The narrator's loss of Ligeia causes him to have a negative view of his future without her, leading him to depression. The narrator's dysfunctional attitude paired with his learned helplessness trigger a desire to medicate his dysregulated emotions and thinking that eventually result in an opium addiction.

Though the narrator cannot remember basic details about who Ligeia was as a person, he cannot forget her physical beauty. Beverly A. Hume writes in "The Madness of Art and Science" that Poe created a narrator who was driven to madness, or at the very least was driven to such mental instability that he would never recover (28). While the opium contributes to this mental instability, the opium does not instigate it. Instead, the narrator's singular love for Ligeia, and inability to move past that love when it is taken from him, eventually drive him to mental instability. Not only does his love and loss of that love destroy him, but it destroys those with whom he interacts, such as his second wife, Rowena, because he is unable to consider anyone valuable who is not Ligeia. According to Leonard W. Engel in "Obsession, Madness, and Enclosure," the narrator's singular love for Ligeia translates to his complete disdain for Rowena. While the narrator's obsession with Ligeia progresses, Rowena's physical health declines, and she ultimately dies from lack of care (Engel 133). The physical descriptions of Ligeia and Rowena evidence the contrasting levels of care. The narrator presents a thorough description of Ligeia, whereas he barely mentions Rowena's appearance. The narrator describes Ligeia's stature, as well as her "exquisite" (257) yet "strange" (257) features. Her "ivory" (257) skin and "soft, voluptuous" (257) lips are reminiscent of a Greek goddess. Her eyes are "larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race," (257) and "even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad" (257). These eyes are, perhaps, the feature he considers the most striking, as "for long hours [has he] pondered upon [them]" (256-58). In contrast, the

narrator only describes Rowena as “fair-haired and blue-eyed” (262). In fact, the narrator devotes more energy to describing the house in which they live than he does to describing his second wife (263). The longer the narrator fixates on Ligeia’s physicality, the worse his obsession and opium addiction become since the focus augments the reality and profundity of the loss.

Not only do the physical descriptions of Ligeia and Rowena evidence the contrasting levels of care, but so does the difference in the narrator’s bedside manner when the women are on their deathbeds. Whereas the narrator is alert and eager to serve Ligeia, he is less willing to cater to Rowena’s needs. The narrator notes that, when Rowena becomes ill, she begins to speak “of sounds, and of motions, in and about the chamber of the turret, which I concluded had no origin save in the distemper of her fancy, or perhaps in the phantasmagoric influences of the chamber itself” (264). Instead of comforting Rowena in her time of turmoil, the narrator ignores her needs and attributes her claims to “the nervous irritation of her temperament and...excitability by trivial causes of fear” (264). With Ligeia, however, the narrator notices every sign of declining health and makes every effort to prevent her death. Ligeia’s eyes “shone less and less frequently,” (259) and “the pale fingers became of the transparent waxen hue of the grave and the blue veins upon the lofty forehead swelled and sank impetuously with the tides of the most gentle emotion” (260), but the narrator claims Ligeia loved him well through it all. Even in her weakest state, the narrator recalls that Ligeia held his hand and professed her unbridled passion for him (259-60). In return, the narrator heeds Ligeia’s desires, including reading aloud a poem which she wrote. Though the narrator does not love Rowena like he loves Ligeia, Rowena does not love the narrator like Ligeia allegedly loved him either. Rowena “dreaded the fierce moodiness of [his] temper...she shunned [him] and loved [him] but little” (264). The narrator’s bedside manner towards Rowena might have improved if she loved him

like Ligeia loved him; however, Rowena might have loved him more if the narrator was neither obsessed with Ligeia nor addicted to opium.

Throughout Rowena's illness, the narrator wrestles with the idea that Rowena is transforming into Ligeia, thus resurrecting her. However, Ligeia's poem which the narrator reads aloud prior to her death foreshadows the ending of the story – that death ultimately conquers Ligeia. Daryl E. Jones theorizes in "Poe's Siren" that Ligeia fights death because of the mutual love she shares with the narrator, and the narrator cannot accept her death because of his perception of her will to live (36). Although there are references to the human will throughout the story, Ligeia's poem, "The Conqueror Worm," contradicts those references by depicting how death does not consider the strength of one's will to live; it merely conquers. The poem's setting is a theater filled with a lively audience eager "to see a play of hopes and fears" (260). These hopes are quickly dashed by "Horror the soul of the plot" (261) when the Conqueror Worm makes its appearance:

Out – out are the lights – out all!  
 And over each quivering form,  
 The curtain, a funeral pall,  
 Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
 And the angels, all pallid and wan,  
 Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
 That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"  
 And its hero, the Conqueror Worm. (33-40)

Sova argues that the Worm is an appropriate image to use because corpses are often viewed as worm food (50). Furthermore, Poe's inclusion of this poem in "Ligeia" signifies that Ligeia does

not resurrect in the final scene since “each quivering form” (Sova 50) is subject to the power of the Conqueror Worm. Therefore, the narrator is only suffering from an opium-induced hallucination when he sees Rowena transformed into Ligeia in the final scene.

Poe revised two of his short stories – “Ligeia and “The Fall of the House of Usher” – to include poems following their initial publications. In both cases, the poems are proleptic in that they foreshadow the narrator’s ending and, by extension, foreshadow Poe’s ending. In “Embedded and Embodied Poetry,” Elena Anastasaki references Poe’s view on consistency of form to argue that the inclusion of the poems must fulfill a specific purpose (*Connotations*). Poe’s view on consistency of form concerns the *unity of effect*, or choosing whatever incidents and tones best aid in the construction of a certain effect (*Philosophy of Composition*). Based on that principle, Poe would not have revised his stories to include poems, disrupting the narrative in the process, if the poems did not best aid him in the construction of a certain effect. Anastasaki argues that the purpose of “The Conqueror Worm” in “Ligeia” is to reveal truth of which the unreliable narrator is not himself aware:

Poetry in those tales is presented as conveying a higher form of Truth, one that bypasses both the unreliability of the narrator and the limitations of the rationality of prose...

Poetry is circumventing logical conscious thinking and allows access to a deeper and less conscious part of the characters. Vagueness, which is a disadvantage in prose, is the means of poetry to convey meaning. (“Embedded and Embodied Poetry”)

Since Ligeia is the author of the poem in the story, and since the poem allows deeper access to a less conscious part of herself, then she is aware her death will be final; she is aware that death ultimately conquers man. Considering Poe as the true author of the poem and abiding by the same principle, he, too, was aware that death ultimately conquers man. The narrator’s obsession

with Ligeia signifies he has not, and perhaps cannot, process his grief; the consequence is an addiction to opium which leads to his complete mental instability and downfall. Similarly, Poe's inability to process his grief over the repeated losses of women in his life leads to his downfall.

The narrator hallucinates Rowena transforming into Ligeia, signifying his search to rediscover the image of his lost love. The narrator's search for the image of his lost love is like Poe's search for the image of his lost mother. Whereas the narrator compares his love-image to Rowena when he compares her to his first-love, Ligeia, Poe projects his mother-image onto the women with whom he interacted throughout life, as supported by Attachment Theory. Carrie Zlotnick-Woldenberg writes in "An Object-Relational Interpretation" that, because Poe was never able to make reparation with the loss of his mother, he was "condemned to a life dominated by attachment to internal objects" (405). This attachment to internal objects resulted in characters such as Ligeia and Rowena, who allowed him to continually idealize the mother-image (Zlotnick-Woldenberg 405). Zlotnick-Woldenberg argues that if the narrator in "Ligeia" had confronted his grief and processed the loss of Ligeia, he would also have been forced to confront feelings of abandonment and anger in relation to Ligeia, which would lead him to realize Ligeia was merely an ordinary woman. However, he neither confronts his grief nor processes his loss, instead projecting his feelings of abandonment and anger on Rowena, allowing him to maintain the idealized image of Ligeia (409). Elisabete Lopes, in "Unburying the Wife," references Elisabeth Bronfen's book *Over Her Dead Body*: "Part of the equation between femininity and death resides precisely in the fact that Woman as man's object of desire is on the side of death not only because she reflects the always already lost primordial mother but because she so often serves as non-reciprocal 'dead' figure of imaginary projection" (qtd. in 42). Ligeia is a dead figure of imaginary projection for the narrator. His obsession with Ligeia, or his



idealization of Ligeia, causes his opium-induced hallucinations to be a projection of that ideal onto Rowena. Ligeia is also a reflection of the lost primordial mother for Poe. Ligeia's death and the narrator's projection of her image onto another woman mirror Poe's mother's death and his projection of his mother's image onto other women.

One aspect of Ligeia's physicality, which further emphasizes that she is a reflection of Poe's lost primordial mother, is Ligeia's eyes. Morrison theorizes a connection between the narrator's fixation on Ligeia's eyes and Poe's memory of his mother's eyes. The narrator describes Ligeia's eyes in more detail than he does other aspects of her physicality, and Morrison theorizes that it is a memory of Poe's mother's eyes which inspired Ligeia's most described feature. Poe's mother's death clearly impacted him. Poe's narrators often interact with dying women, as he interacted with his dying mother. Furthermore, Poe's narrators fixate on the eyes of dying women multiple times – not only in “Ligeia” but also in the poems “To Helen,” “Ulalume,” and “Annabel Lee.” The poem “To Helen,” published in an 1848 issue of *Sartain's Union Magazine*, is addressed to Sarah Helen Whitman and describes Whitman and Poe's first encounter (Sova 182). However, when Poe sent Whitman a copy of the poem prior to its publication, he claims the poem's details were revealed to him in a dream, albeit the dream occurred following Whitman and Poe's first encounter (Morrison 49). In the fourth stanza of the poem, Poe writes about the eyes he saw in his dream:

All – all expired save thee – save less than thou;

Save only the divine light in thine eyes –

Save but the soul in thine uplifted eyes.

I saw but them – they were the world to me.

I saw but them – saw only them for hours –

Saw only them until the moon went down. (lines 36-41)

The eyes described in “To Helen” appear to have fixated Poe as much as Ligeia’s eyes fixate the narrator. Non-incidentally, Poe included in the letter to Whitman that the details of “Ligeia” were revealed to him in the same way as the details of “To Helen” – in a “dream” (Morrison 49). Poe dreamt of these eyes twice, if not more; his subconscious was possibly attempting to process the emotions of continually losing mother-images. According to Soudabeh Givrad, author of “Dream Theory and Science,” dreams are the subconscious’ way of helping process emotions, even acting as a form of psychodynamic psychotherapy which “attempt[s] to free the association process, making psychological connections while preventing acting out, within a safe environment...this is especially true in the wake of an acute trauma when the individual needs a space to work on issues resulting from the traumatic event” (201). As Poe continually lost mother-images, it is likely that his dreams attempted to help him process those losses.

The poems “Ulalume” and “Annabel Lee” differ from “To Helen” and the poem included in “Ligeia” in that Poe did not claim that the details of the poem were revealed to him in a dream. However, the poems are similar in that the narrators of “Ulalume” and “Annabel Lee” recall a dear love whom they lost and rely on a pair of eyes to find that love again. In the fifth stanza of the poem “Ulalume”, as the narrator walks toward the tomb of his lost love, he describes the eyes of Astarte:

She has seen that the tears are not dry on  
 These cheeks, where the worm never dies,  
 And has come past the stars of the Lion,  
 To point us the path to the skies –  
 To the Lethean peace of the skies –

Come up, in despite of the Lion,  
 To shine on us with her bright eyes –  
 Come up, through the lair of the Lion,  
 With love on her luminous eyes. (42-50)

J. O. Bailey examines this poem in “Geography of Poe’s Dreamland” and correlates the narrator’s interest in Astarte’s eyes with his interest in finding his lost love. The narrator hopes that the light in Astarte’s eyes will guide the way as the narrator searches for his love’s tomb. His hope does not last for long, however, as his Psyche reminds him that such eyes cannot be trusted (521). The eyes described in “Ulalume” do not belong to the narrator’s lost love, but they impact the narrator as much as the eyes described in “To Helen” and “Ligeia.” Because “Ulalume” was published in an edition of *American Whig Review* in 1847, the year after Virginia died, some critics theorize the poem is about her (Sova 184).

Critics also believe the poem “Annabel Lee” is about Virginia, as it was printed twice in 1849 and once in 1850, all after Virginia’s death (Sova 26). Even after the death of the narrator’s love, he fixates on her eyes:

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams  
 Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
 And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes  
 Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
 And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
 Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride  
 In her sepulcher there by the sea –  
 In her tomb by the side of the sea. (34-41)

The narrator believes the moon and stars help him by acting as messengers of Annabel Lee. The moon not only brings him dreams of his lost love, but the stars, specifically, bring him images of her bright eyes. Those dreams, those images of her eyes, draw the narrator to her graveside every night, where he lies down next to her (Sova 24). Despite the finality of her death, as demonstrated by the narrator's use of the words "sepulcher" (line 40) and "tomb" (line 41), he still considers her his "life and bride" (line 39). This consideration is similar to the narrator of "Ligeia," who clearly places his life's value in Ligeia, as evidenced by his lack of self-care following her death. Whether "Ulalume" and "Annabel Lee" are about Virginia, the repeated emphasis on eyes in Poe's literature should indicate they are significant to him for some reason. The eyes mentioned in "To Helen," "Ulalume," and "Annabel Lee," and again as a key element of "Ligeia," further emphasize that Poe dealt with the lost primordial mother in his writing.

The narrator provides more detail for Ligeia's eyes than do the narrators in "To Helen" and "Ulalume." The narrator claims that the uniqueness of these eyes, "larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race" (257), could not always be detected. He noticed them only in certain moments, and it was in these moments that he found Ligeia to be the most beautiful (257). From the dark color of the eyes to the irregular shape of the eyebrows to the expression which they bore, the narrator is so entranced by them that he compares himself to an astrologer and her eyes to the "twin stars of Leda" (258). Furthermore, the narrator becomes convinced that Rowena has transformed into Ligeia once he hallucinates Ligeia's eyes. In Rowena's final hours, the narrator wakes in and out of visions of Ligeia. He questions himself as he begins to hallucinate the transformation from Rowena's hair, mouth, cheeks, and height to that of Ligeia's. However, he becomes certain of the transformation once he hallucinates her eyes: "And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. 'Here then, at least,' I shrieked aloud, 'can I never

– can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the Lady Ligeia” (268). The transformation is complete. The narrator is now completely mentally unstable.

When Ligeia dies, the narrator cannot overcome his grief and instead develops an obsession for his lost love that is continually aggravated by his opium addiction. As Rowena dies, the narrator does not display any signs of grief, and instead wills Ligeia to come back to life to the point of hallucinating Rowena’s transformation into Ligeia. While the narrator acknowledges the strange sights and sounds which Rowena sees and hears in her final hours, the narrator misconstrues their cause. Roy P. Basler writes in “Tale of Obsession and Hallucination” that “[the narrator] wants his audience to believe that the power of Ligeia’s will affected her resurrection in the body of Rowena but does not want his audience to recognize...his perceptions [as] mere hallucinations produced by obsessional desire” (124). His obsessional desire, or fixation on Ligeia, and his opium addiction are the reasons for his mental instability. Similarly, Poe’s fixation on rediscovering his mother-image, and the fact that he continually lost those mother-images, pushed him towards depression and, eventually, alcoholism. “Ligeia” foreshadows the narrator’s downward spiral following the death of his beloved wife, Ligeia, but it also foreshadows Poe’s downward spiral following the death of Virginia. Furthermore, “The Conqueror Worm” foreshadows that Poe would not rise from that downward spiral, instead becoming another victim of the Worm – another victim of death.

## Chapter Two – The Obsessive Protagonist in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

“Pain in this life is not avoidable, but the pain we create avoiding pain is avoidable.”

– R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self*

Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” was published in *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1839 (Sova 71). The story was revised to include the poem, “The Haunted Palace,” and was re-published as a part of *Tales by Edgar A. Poe* in 1845 (71). The story has been an unquestionable source of inspiration to others by stimulating interesting discussion in the form of literary criticism. Among the many theories in existence, most agree that Roderick Usher suffers from mental instability. However, there is debate about the reliability and mental stability of the narrator throughout the story. The narrator enters the Usher mansion intending to offer Roderick his friendship as solace during Roderick’s physical and mental decline; instead, the narrator declines mentally alongside Roderick, offering his perspective to readers so that they may gain a clearer understanding of the terror of the soul.

This chapter will examine the events that transpire before, during, and after the narrator enters the Usher mansion, and the chapter will argue that the narrator is mentally unstable from the beginning, and his obsession with Roderick’s illness causes him to continue his visit in the Usher mansion. The narrator’s mental instability is exacerbated by Roderick’s condition, the environmental conditions surrounding the mansion, and Roderick’s reading of “The Haunted Palace,” which eventually force him to confront his instability. When the narrator finally confronts his instability, his obsession momentarily collapses and allows him to approach the hope of recovery.

This chapter will also examine the utilization of prolepsis through the inclusion of “The Haunted Palace.” The narrator in “Usher” is not ultimately destroyed, and his obsession only

leads him to a point of complete mental instability, which is interesting considering the story was written before Virginia's diagnosis and death. However, the inclusion of the "The Haunted Palace" following Virginia's diagnosis demonstrates a change in Poe's thought process, since the main theme of "The Haunted Palace" is death and destruction. The poem foreshadows the end of "The Fall of the House of Usher" after the narrator confronts his mental instability – as well as the end of Poe after he confronts his fear: losing another significant female figure from his life – his wife.

The apparent purpose of Poe's narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is to offer friendship to Roderick Usher, who self-professes to be in a state of mental decline; however, the narrator also has a different purpose – to provide a more tangible perspective of mental instability as the narrator fights his fear of being mentally unstable. The narrator has known Roderick since childhood but has lost contact over the years. That contact is re-established when Roderick sends the narrator a letter requesting his immediate presence at the Usher mansion:

[This letter] gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness – of a mental disorder which oppressed him – and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady...and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons. (300)

Roderick's mental instability is evidenced from the beginning of the story. Because Roderick requests the narrator's company during his physical and mental decline, the narrator is assumed to be mentally stable – at least stable enough to be a suitable companion. Ironically, the longer the two men are in one another's company, the more coherent Roderick seems, and the less coherent the narrator seems, since Roderick is at least aware of his physical and mental state. In

“The Self-Consuming Narrator,” Ronald Bieganowski observes that Poe’s narrators often “focus attention less on what they would seem to point to . . . and more on what happens in them as they attempt to express the ineffable” (175). Although the narrator seems to point to Roderick, he is significant in the story because he wages a war on the terror within his own soul, though he is still moving toward the frontlines of that war. The narrator has not yet accepted his mental instability. Consequently, the plot moves forward as the narrator describes what happens while he interacts with Roderick in the Usher mansion (Bieganowski 178). Roderick makes some shocking claims about the Usher mansion and the people within it that are supposedly attributed to psychological defect. The narrator gradually becomes more terrified of Roderick’s condition (Poe 309). Through his terror, he provides revelation to the readers. James W. Gargano notes in “The Question of Poe’s Narrators,” specifically in reference to the narrator of “Usher,” that Poe creates narrators who are often unaware of their suffering, but as they recognize their suffering and strive to discover its source, they provide revelation to the readers (178). Readers are less likely to understand mental instability through a third-person account of Roderick’s diminishing of health than they are to understand mental instability through the narrator’s first-person account as he deals with his obsession and ultimately confronts his fear. In other words, the narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher” provides a different and more direct perspective. Mental instability, which is only slightly accessible through the character of Roderick, is made more accessible through the narrator’s point of view.

The narrator exhibits symptoms of mental instability almost immediately, though they are not as explicit as Roderick’s symptoms. Before the narrator enters the Usher mansion, there are several details indicating the narrator suffers from mental instability. Furthermore, the scene immediately before the narrator enters the mansion foreshadows the catharsis that the narrator



will undergo inside the mansion. The narrator describes the “dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, [and he] had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary country” (Poe 299). The narrator feels a darkness, an oppressiveness, even before he arrives on the Usher mansion’s property. If his darkness were solely a result of the Usher mansion, it would not begin to develop until after he arrived on the property and began interacting with the environmental conditions. This darkness is further characterized by his being alone. The narrator is alone physically in this moment, but he is also alone mentally and emotionally because of his mental instability. Eventually, “as the shades of the evening drew on” (299), the Usher mansion comes into view and “a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded [the narrator’s] spirit,” that grows into an “an utter depression of soul” (299). The narrator cannot pinpoint what it is about the Usher mansion that unnerves him, but he is keenly aware of the mansion affecting him in some way. When he arrives on the property, he takes a moment to stare into a lake which mirrors the mansion, contemplating the surrounding environmental conditions:

I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up...from the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapor. (300-01)

The narrator does not definitively claim that there are peculiar environmental conditions surrounding the Usher mansion. Rather, he shares that he worked upon his imagination, he convinced himself, to believe in these peculiar environmental conditions. These supposed environmental conditions retains significance throughout the story because it is partly blamed for

Roderick's mental instability. If the narrator can convince himself that the environmental conditions are to be blamed for Roderick's mental instability, then he can also convince himself that, when his symptoms worsen, it is because of exposure to the environmental conditions as opposed to a pre-existing condition. The environmental conditions might be partly responsible for aggravating the narrator's symptoms; however, the narrator clearly exhibits symptoms before he sets foot on the property of the Usher mansion.

The scene wherein the narrator stares into a lake before entering the Usher mansion foreshadows the cathartic effect that the narrator will undergo. While staring in the lake, the narrator also notices "a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Poe 301). This small fissure in the mansion is indicative of the house's hazardous physical state and the narrator's and Roderick's hazardous mental states. The fact that the visibility of the small fissure becomes lost in the reflection emanating from the tarn foreshadows the cathartic effect that entering the Usher mansion will have on the narrator. Just as the fissure becomes lost in the tarn, the narrator's fear of mental instability will culminate and dissipate in the Usher mansion through exposure to his source of anxiety. Brett Zimmerman, in "Poe as Amateur Psychologist," discusses exposure therapy as a treatment for anxiety:

In psychotherapy, phobic clients are often treated with a regimen of systematic desensitization, the gradual exposure to the object of the irrational fear until the client is either cured altogether or at least better able to cope...[n]aturally, this experience will initiate extreme responses (such as a panic attack with its various physiological symptoms). The mind cannot stay anxious indefinitely, however, and after awhile the

client will begin to realize that nothing terrible is going to happen and therefore gradually become calm. (14-15)

The narrator obsesses over Roderick's mental illness and is continually terrified by Roderick's symptoms (Poe 309). Hence, the narrator is noticeably more unnerved upon coming into view of the Usher mansion. The narrator is directly exposed to the source of his anxiety while interacting with Roderick: the more that the narrator is exposed to Roderick's mental instability, the more he finds Roderick's mental illness infecting him (309). The narrator's final confrontation with his anxiety causes him to panic and flee the premises, but the mansion's collapse into the tarn at the end of the story indicates that the narrator's fear can collapse as he better learns to cope through similarly cathartic experiences.

The narrator is further proved mentally unstable through his gradual acceptance of Roderick's outrageous claims. The narrator almost immediately recognizes in Roderick "an excessive nervous agitation" (Poe 302), which is more recognizable as Roderick briefly discusses "the severe and long-continued illness...of a tenderly beloved sister" (303). After this sister, Madeline, allegedly dies, Roderick and the narrator bury her in the family tomb. Days after Madeline's burial, Roderick claims to hear strange noises coming from the tomb. John C. Gruesser, in "Madmen and Moonbeams," notes that the narrator clings to the assumption that Roderick is mad, consequently assuming that everything Roderick says is madness. It is plausible that Madeline is buried prematurely if she is cataleptic. Roderick's mental instability, coupled with his grief, prevents him from recognizing the catalepsies. It is also plausible that when Madeline finally escapes from her tomb upon awakening from her catalepsies, she seeks her brother, the one who ignores her cries for help from the tomb. Finally, it is plausible that when Roderick sees his sister alive in the doorway he collapses from sheer terror (Gruesser 84-

85). Whether Roderick's sister causes the strange noises alive or dead is irrelevant; what is relevant is that the narrator accepts Roderick's truth as his own truth as well. The narrator believes a mentally unstable man's claims because he, too, is unstable.

Another one of Roderick's truths that the narrator accepts as his own is that the mansion is sentient, and Roderick's reading certain texts aggravates the mansion's emotions. Roderick deals with his sadness over his sister's alleged death by reading texts, which Craig Howes claims in "Teaching Usher and Genre" have a harmful effect on the mansion and its surrounding environmental conditions. Howes writes that Roderick reads certain texts because he experiences his emotions more fully through them. Furthermore, Roderick believes that what he reads not only directly affects his emotions, but also affects his physical state, as these certain works of literature affect the house and surrounding environmental conditions (Howes 33). Roderick believes that everything, even inanimate objects, are sentient. Therefore, the house and surrounding environmental conditions possess emotions, and if reading certain texts affects Roderick's emotions, then the texts also affect the house's emotions. Roderick explains that the mansion's sentience exhibits itself through the stones of the house in that a fungi gradually covers them, and the trees surrounding them decay over time (307). Harriet Hustis discusses this type of belief in "Reading Encrypted but Persistent" through an examination of gothic reading. Hustis defines gothic reading as reading to activate that which happens within a text: "It is ultimately the collusion between text and reader that creates the gothic; the reading of the gothic text effectively activates the text as gothic" (*Studies in American Fiction*). Roderick believes that he engages in a gothic reading whenever he reads something in a text that parallels with what later occurs in and around the mansion.

Though the idea of gothic reading was included in the first publication of “The Fall of the House of Usher” in 1839, the poem, “The Haunted Palace,” was not included until the story’s republication in 1842 (Sova 71). The poem was included under the pretense of being Roderick’s own, and the king’s downfall in the poem mirrors Roderick’s downfall in the Usher mansion (Sova 79-80). The king resided in a “fair and stately palace” (line 3) until “evil things, in robes of sorrow, [a]ssailed the monarch’s high estate” (lines 33-34). The palace became both deserted and haunted as “a hideous throng rush out forever [a]nd laugh – but smile no more” (lines 47-48). Elena Anastasaki argues in “Embedded and Embodied Poetry” that “The Haunted Palace” foreshadows the Usher mansion’s future in the same way that “The Conqueror Worm” foreshadows Ligeia’s definitive death in “Ligeia”. Another shared purpose between “The Haunted Palace” and “The Conqueror Worm” is that they both reveal truths of which the narrators are not yet aware: in this case, the truth is that Roderick’s mental state is not completely destroyed. Although Roderick is mentally unstable, a degree of clarity is required to construct a poem that so closely resembles his own life. Because Roderick is able to write “The Haunted Palace” and include the details that he includes, he possesses a degree of mental clarity. This mental clarity contrasts with the narrator’s continually declining stability. Whether the narrator accepts Roderick’s belief about the gothic readings of certain texts, he begins to see the mansion’s sentience exhibited in the same way as Roderick sees it.

Although the narrator might not consciously believe Roderick’s claims about the mansion directly affecting his mental instability, the narrator experiences a similar mental decline the longer he is inside the mansion and exposed to the environmental conditions. At the time Poe wrote this story, half of this atmospheric theory would have been easily accepted. I.M. Walker explains in “The Legitimate Source of Terror” that Poe’s use of the word ‘atmosphere’ does not

refer only to the air surrounding the house. Instead, the word ‘atmosphere’ refers to a distinct cloud of gas found in the air. At this time, many people believed such environmental conditions caused physical and mental illnesses (587). Roderick is not unique in his belief that the environmental conditions surrounding the house contribute to his mental instability. Instead, what is unique about Roderick is his belief that reading certain texts catalyzes the harmful environmental conditions, which then exacerbates his symptoms, and eventually exacerbates the narrator’s symptoms. The narrator admits that “[i]t was no wonder that [Roderick’s] condition terrified – that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (Poe 309). So far, the relationship that Roderick and the narrator share seems to be an unhealthy one in the sense that Roderick’s condition is only aggravating the narrator’s. David Roche describes unhealthy relationships in “The Unhealthy” as a relationship wherein one person or thing negatively impacts the other person’s physical, mental, or emotional health (22). Roderick negatively impacts the narrator’s mental and emotional health by aggravating the narrator’s fear of mental instability and obsession with rejecting that fear. Furthermore, if Roderick is correct in claiming that reading certain texts harms the environmental conditions and then harms him, then he is also putting the narrator at risk physically. However, the narrator needs this relationship to expose him to mental instability so that he can confront his fear and stop obsessing.

Though interacting with Roderick and the Usher mansion has not improved the narrator’s mental state, the narrator remains inside the mansion and in the presence of Roderick. During the narrator’s final moments in the Usher mansion, the narrator fully confronts his fear and undergoes catharsis that allows him hope of recovery. The narrator enters Roderick’s bedroom on the night he becomes completely mad to find him standing in front of an open window while

a storm rages outside. Because Roderick and the narrator both believe the surrounding environmental conditions aggravate Roderick's mental instability, the narrator lures Roderick away from the open window. The narrator cries, "You must not – you shall not behold this...[t]hese appearances, which bewilder you...it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn" (Poe 310). The narrator seats Roderick in a rocking chair and begins reading a poem (310). As the narrator reads, Roderick hears more strange noises coming from the family tomb: "when the narrator attempts to cure his friend's superstition by reading to him, ironically, he finds himself wondering whether he has not lost his sanity" (Roche 29). Despite Roderick's fear, he remains in the Usher mansion beside Roderick.

The more that the narrator reads, the more prominent the strange, likely auditory hallucinations (313), followed by "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door" (Poe 313). Roderick, who has been cognizant of his mental instability throughout the story, is now also aware of the narrator's instability. Roderick forces the narrator to confront his fear – that he, too, is mad – before being assaulted by Madeline and collapsing to his death. The narrator, having witnessed Roderick's death and being forced to confront his fear that he, too, is mentally unstable then flees the mansion. After fleeing the Usher mansion, the narrator stares into the tarn once more, and what he sees signifies the cathartic effect that his visit to Roderick has had. The narrator again notices the small fissure in the mansion that is visible in the tarn:

[t]his fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rush asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher." (313)

In “Locke, Kant, and Gothic Fiction,” G. R. Thompson considers the Usher mansion crumbling into the tarn a symbol of the narrator’s obsession crumbling (548). The narrator approaches the Usher mansion in the beginning of the story with the intention of chronicling Roderick’s mental degradation: he fears mental instability and obsessively denies his fear. He is exposed to his fear during his time with Roderick, whose condition, along with the environmental conditions and the gothic reading of certain texts, only aggravate the narrator’s symptoms. Finally, the narrator is forced to confront his fear when Roderick calls him a madman (313). That the narrator finally confronts his fear and survives indicates the hope of recovery, even though he panics and flees the mansion. The narrator experiences catharsis through the strange events at the Usher mansion and escapes, which allows him to approach the hope of recovery.

The narrator in “The Fall of the House of Usher” is only one of Poe’s many narrators who provide readers a more accessible view of mental instability. His self-assured reliability and mental stability in comparison with Roderick’s throughout the story ultimately support just how unreliable and mentally unstable he is. However, unlike the narrator of “Ligeia,” this narrator’s instability does not directly lead to his demise. Instead, the narrator has a choice. In “Explanation on ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” Beverly R. Voloshin states that “[t]hough Usher is destroyed by his creations, the narrator escapes, representing that part of the Romantic artist which can survive or recreate the imagined world” (423). The narrator survives, as does his hope of recovery, because he confronts his fear of mental instability despite his obsession with rejecting that fear. The narrator can choose to continue obsessing, or to cope and move beyond his obsession. During Virginia’s illness and immediately following her death, Poe had a similar choice. “The Fall of the House of Usher” foreshadows the choice Poe had after his wife’s death, to confront the fear of losing another mother-image and work towards recovery, but “The



Haunted Palace” foreshadows that Poe would not recover. Ultimately, Poe was unable to move beyond his obsession; otherwise Poe’s hope of recovery might have survived.

## Chapter Three – The Obsessive Protagonist in “The Tell-Tale Heart”

“Glory, built on selfish principles, is shame and guilt.”

- William Cowper, *Table Talk*

This chapter will first examine the narrator’s symptoms and argue that his condition is most closely comparable to paranoid schizophrenia. Secondly, this chapter will argue that the narrator is cognizant enough to be responsible for his murder of the old man despite his mental instability; however, the narrator is compelled to confess and consequently destroyed because of the obsession that results from his mental instability. Similarly, Poe was responsible for the choices he made following Virginia’s diagnosis and death despite his depression and alcoholism. However, Poe was destroyed because of his obsession over the loss of significant women in his life, which aggravated by his depression and alcoholism. Furthermore, he was destroyed by the lack of positive male-figures in his life that made stability and functionality even less attainable. Not only does Poe’s positive mother-image manifest itself in his fiction, but Poe’s negative father-image manifests itself in his fiction as well.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” was published in an 1843 issue of *The Pioneer*, and re-printed in an 1845 issue of *The Broadway Journal* (Sova 174). The narrators in “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” are not ultimately destroyed in their stories. Instead, their obsessions led them to a point of complete mental instability. In contrast, in addition to “The Tell-Tale Heart” narrator’s mental instability, his obsession leads to his destruction. The plot difference between these three stories is interesting considering Virginia was not yet sick when the first two stories were originally published before the addition of the poems “The Conqueror Worm” and “The Haunted Palace.” After Poe’s wife, Virginia, had become sick and was dying, “The Tell-Tale

Heart” was published, and “The Conqueror Worm” and “The Haunted Palace” were added, which indicates Poe’s more hopeless mentality (Quinn 347).

The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is clearly the one who murdered the old man, but some critics believe that the narrator’s mental instability is severe enough that he should not be held responsible for murdering the old man. For instance, Vincent Buranelli argues in “Madness as Realism” that Poe’s characters, the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” included, cannot be condemned for their crimes because of how severely mental illness afflicts them: “Remorse is always a compulsion, never the self-accusation of a stable conscience after a free and deliberate act...[Poe] enters the field of the starkly, almost clinically, realistic investigation of men who although they may feel uneasy about their mental states when their tensions are let up, are too far gone to understand their mania, let alone to control it” (56, 58). Buranelli and critics with a similar mindset are correct in claiming that the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” cannot understand his mania, and that his remorse is a compulsion of that mania. However, their argument is partly flawed because the narrator’s actions, despite his mental instability, are controllable.

Women are often idealized in Poe’s stories, and the narrators respond to the deaths of these idealized women with long-term mourning. The men in Poe’s stories, however, are often despised by the narrators, who then act out of malicious intent. One example is “The Cask of Amontillado,” wherein the narrator, Montresor, seeks revenge on Fortunato. Montresor lures Fortunato underground with a cask of amontillado, but instead of imbibing together, Montresor traps Fortunato behind a brick wall and leaves him to die. Another example, the focus of this chapter, is “The Tell-Tale Heart,” wherein the narrator despises the old man’s evil eye and consequently murders him. The narrator is constantly exposed to the old man’s evil eye because

the two live together, but the relationship between the two is never definitively stated. However, critics speculate about the relationship. For instance, in “Madness in Poe’s Tales,” Daniel Hoffman theorizes that the narrator could be the old man’s son or another such family member, although Hoffman has no real support for this theory (81). Regardless of the narrator’s relationship to the old man, the man is older than the narrator, so he has the potential to be a father-figure. Poe claimed that the men in his life never helped him when he was in need (Wagenknecht 174). Not only was Poe referencing his foster-father, John Allan, who refused to help Poe financially multiple times through Poe’s life, but he was also referencing men like S. Elmira Royster’s father (Pruette). If the narrator shares the same view of men as Poe, then he has a generally negative view of men, regardless of the relationship. Poe endowed his narrators with the same negative view of men; if Poe’s positive mother-image transferred to the women in his fiction, then his negative father-image could have transferred to the men in his fiction as well. Hoffman supports this theory of transference in “The Tell-Tale Heart” in a section of “Madness in Poe’s Tales” entitled “Killing the Disapproving Father”:

All the more so if the father-figure in this tale be, in one of his aspects, a Father-Figure. As, to an infant, his own natural father doubtless is. As, to the baby Eddie, his foster-father may have been. Perhaps he had even a subliminal memory of his natural father, who so early deserted him...to the hard knocks experience held in store. So, the evil in that Evil Eye is likely a mingling of the stern reproaches of conscience with the reminder of his own subjection to time, age, and death. (81)

In other words, Hoffman argues that the evil in the old man’s eye reflects the hardship to which Poe was exposed because of the lack of positive father-figures in his life. Poe’s narrator murders a male character out of malicious intent in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The narrator could be acting in

response to Poe's subconscious desires – to eliminate the men that made stability and functionality even less attainable.

Poe was aware during his time as a writer of developing psychological issues, such as paranoid schizophrenia (Cleman 63). The symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia manifest themselves in the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart." The National Institute of Mental Health defines schizophrenia as "a chronic and severe mental disorder that affects how a person thinks, feels, and behaves. People with schizophrenia may seem like they have lost touch with reality. Although schizophrenia is not as common as other mental disorders, the symptoms can be very disabling" ("Schizophrenia"). The narrator feels the old man's eye watching him, and his discomfort with the watchful eye informs his decision to murder the old man (Poe 498). As the American Psychological Association delineates, a symptom of schizophrenia is "trouble thinking logically" ("Recognizing the Signs"). The narrator cannot separate the old man's eye from his person. For the narrator, the old man's evil eye completely encompasses his positive aspects. The narrator acknowledges that "[h]e had never wronged me. He had never given me insult" (Poe 498). Regardless, the narrator states, "I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (498) because of how he obsesses over the eye. Zimmerman writes that such obsessions lend themselves to overwhelming anxiety in schizophrenics (40). The narrator's obsession over the eye prompts him to murder the old man. After dismembering the corpse and burying it, once the police arrive, the narrator exhibits signs of overwhelming anxiety. He becomes anxious about the beating heart, buried underneath the floorboards in the room where the police sit. He cannot relevantly contribute to the conversation with the police, instead only talking to prevent the police from hearing the beating heart, as well. This anxiety eventually leads the narrator to confess (501).

The narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart” also suffers from auditory hallucinations. Hallucinations are another symptom which the American Psychological Association finds common in schizophrenics, “such as hearing voices or seeing things that others do not experience” (“Recognizing the Signs”). Zimmerman notes that according to psychologists, 74% of these hallucinations are audible instead of visual. While many of these audible hallucinations are voices that originate in the schizophrenic’s mind, some of these hallucinations are random sounds (Zimmerman 40). For instance, the narrator hallucinates hearing the dead old man’s beating heart after he buries it underneath his floorboards (501). J. Alber, et al. confirm in “Unnatural Narratives” that the narrator hallucinates the dead old man’s beating heart because the police do not hear it, so there is no evidence that the heart is actually beating in the narrated world (*Narrative*). Although the narrator acknowledges having a disease, he does not consider what occurs within the story to be a result of that disease. The narrator believes “[his] disease had sharpened [his] sense – not destroyed – not dulled them” (Poe 498). Therefore, when he hallucinates the dead old man’s beating heart, he believes the beating is legitimate and, initially, that he is the only one who can hear it because of his sharpened senses. Eventually, he hallucinates the heart beating louder and louder, and he demonstrates another symptom of schizophrenia – “difficulty paying attention” (“Recognizing the Signs”). The narrator ushers the police into his home and addresses their concerns over the absence of the old man, then invites them to sit and rest in the room wherein the body is buried (501). The longer they sit and talk, however, the more difficulty the narrator has paying attention: “I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and chatted. The ringing became more distinct: – it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness” (Poe 501). Prior to

the narrator's auditory hallucinations, he "answered cheerily" while the police "chatted of familiar things" (501). Once he begins hallucinating the beating heart, he talks more freely, indicating he is no longer simply responding to the police. Instead, he fills the potential silence with words that might not be relevant to the conversation to prevent the police from hearing the beating heart as well.

Finally, the narrator exhibits the schizophrenic symptom of "delusions of persecution" (Zimmerman 43). Ultimately, these delusions prompt the narrator to confess his crime. The louder his auditory hallucinations become, the more convinced the narrator is that the police know what he did and are mocking him by failing to indict him: "Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, no! They heard! – they suspected! – they *knew!* – they were making a mockery of my horror! – this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer" (Poe 501). The narrator then confesses his crime to stop the persecution which deludes him (501). Although schizophrenia was not commonly recognized until 1911 (Jablensky), psychologists occasionally published studies describing cases wherein the subject demonstrated symptoms of schizophrenia. For instance, James Cowles Prichard includes in his *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind*, published before "The Tell-Tale Heart" in 1837, the case of a young man who frequently moved because he believed all his roommates disliked him (38). This case clearly exhibits the delusions of persecution present in "The Tell-Tale Heart," although the man in this case responded differently than the narrator. Other studies published while Poe was writing describe the symptoms of schizophrenia, including delusions of persecution, which Poe could easily have studied and then applied to his characters. The narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" exhibits the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, proving he is

mentally unstable and cannot control his delusions. However, he is not forced to respond to his delusions by murdering the old man, and he should be held responsible for his murder of the old man.

Poe garnered inspiration from several contemporary insanity-defense cases. John Cleman notes in “Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Plea” that there were two insanity-defense cases occurring near where Poe lived in Philadelphia between 1838 and 1844, and both cases featured the same defense attorney – Peter A. Browne. Browne asked the juries to consider “the *real nature of the actions*, which are either *atrocious crimes*, or the *dreadful effects of diseases*” (63-64). Whether the narrator is recounting his crime to a jury or merely to an imagined audience, those hearing his story must determine how morally and legally responsible he is for his acts. The narrator neither denies his disease, nor does he deny murdering and brutally dismembering the old man. Instead, the narrator emphasizes the symptoms of his disease throughout his story. Louis A. Renza argues in “Never More in Poe’s Tell-Tale American Tale” that the narrator is proven mad through his “apparently motiveless crime” and “methodically violent” means of disposing of the old man (25). However, the narrator is proven mad long before he commits the crime, evidenced by his obsession with the old man’s eye which “resembled that of a vulture” (Poe 498). His obsession with the eye is symptomatic of his disease. His murder of the old man is not symptomatic of his disease – only a result of his obsession. Based on Poe’s possible knowledge of how to construct an insanity-defense case as a result of the cases occurring near him, Cleman argues that the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is “morally and legally responsible for his acts” (66) despite his mental instability.

Poe wrote an article about one insanity-defense case wherein the accused, James Wood, was acquitted. Wood’s behavior before, during, and after the trial was notably different from the



narrator's behavior. This article, known as "The Trial of James Wood," was published on April 1, 1840, in an issue of *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* (Wall 131). James Wood was decidedly "Not Guilty, on the ground of insanity" for the murder of his daughter, Mrs. Sarah Ann Peak ("The Trial"). Poe writes in his article that one aspect of Wood's crime went unacknowledged by the court – his disposition when purchasing the gun used to commit the murder: "It appears from the testimony that the conduct of Wood, when purchasing his pistols at the shop of the gunsmith, was characterized by an entire self-possession — a remarkable calmness — an evenness of manner altogether foreign to his usual nervous habit. His replies were cool, and without the slightest apparent trepidation" ("The Trial"). Poe theorizes that Wood's demeanor while purchasing the gun was not discussed by the court to prevent his calmness being considered a sign of sanity. However, Poe believes this calmness to be in alignment with the behavior of other madmen: "The cunning of the maniac — a cunning which baffles that of the wisest man of sound mind — the amazing self-possession with which at times, he assumes the demeanor, and preserves the appearance, of perfect sanity, have long been matters of comment with those who have made the subject of mania their study" ("The Trial"). Poe does not offer an opinion about the true nature of Wood's mental state, but his article about Wood's trial demonstrates an understanding of insanity-defense cases. Poe could have applied this understanding of what juries need to hear to deem a defendant not guilty on the ground of insanity to create characters who appear not guilty as well. If Poe agreed with the court's ruling – that Wood was "Not Guilty, on the ground of insanity" ("The Trial") – and Wood's calmness while purchasing the gun influenced Poe's agreement, then a comparison of Wood and "The Tell-Tale Heart" narrator will reveal the difference between inculpable and culpable murderers.

One difference between Wood and the narrator is their ability to distinguish between right and wrong. In “Narrative Purpose and Legal Logic,” Brian Wall notes that the accused’s acquittal during an insanity-defense case requires convincing “a jury either that the narrator was unable to appreciate the nature and quality of his actions or that he was unable to recognize that his actions were wrong” (136). Although the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and Wood are both deemed mentally unstable, and rightfully so, Wood was judged inculpable in the murder of his daughter because his mental instability prevented him from distinguishing between right and wrong. An article detailing Wood’s murder of his daughter, printed by *The Extra Globe*, states that Wood murdered his daughter because she married someone of whom Wood did not approve (368). Once Wood discovered his daughter’s marriage, he became mentally unstable:

From [that] moment her father was a maniac. He saw the daughter whom his affections had so long cherished, united to a common gambler. It was too much for [his] frail nature. The instant condition of Mr. Wood was discovered...Peak sent a messenger demanding his wife...From a condition of frantic fury, [Wood] became suddenly calm...Leaving the house, he repaired to Tryon’s gun store, where he purchased and charged two pair of pistols. He then returned home, entered the apartment of his daughter...immediately after embracing her with tears, he placed one of the pistols to her head, and blew out her brains...[the sheriff] found the idiotic father fondling on the corpse of his child. (368)

Wood’s behavior before and after the murder of his daughter indicates Wood believed he made the right decision for his daughter, whereas the narrator’s behavior after the murder of the old man indicates he knows that what he did was wrong. Wood clearly loved his daughter and believed marrying “a common gambler” was a bad decision. If murdering her was an attempt to

save her from her allegedly bad decision, then his emotional distress is fitting. He seemed to think he was being altruistic by murdering her. If he murdered her because of pure selfishness, then he would not have been so emotionally distraught prior to and following the act. He committed a crime, believing it was the right decision because of the life his daughter would have given the alternative. His mental instability blurred the lines between right and wrong. In contrast, the narrator's mental instability does not blur his lines between right and wrong, as his attempt at self-defense evidences. The narrator does not deny his disease, nor does he defend himself against having murdered the old man (Wall 135). Instead, the narrator attempts to defend his reasons for murdering the old man, which indicates that the narrator knows murder is wrong, though he believes his reasons for murder are justifiable. His confession also demonstrates his ability to distinguish between right and wrong. The narrator confesses to end the police's mockery of him, which were his "delusions of persecutions" (Zimmerman 43). Though the delusions of persecution are a symptom of his paranoid schizophrenia, they manifest because of his guilt. If the narrator did not know the murder was wrong, he would not have felt compelled to hide the body from himself or from the police. Furthermore, knowledge of the hidden body would not have been a source of mockery. The narrator's delusions of persecution, compulsion to hide the dead body, and attempt to justify the murder prove he is culpable for his crime.

Another difference between Wood and the narrator is their ability to appreciate their crimes. Wood seemed pained both before and after murdering his daughter. When the sheriff found them, Wood was emotionally distraught. He is not recorded as boasting about the methods of his crime, whereas the narrator does boast about his methods. The narrator is proud of how he treats the old man prior to the murder:

You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it – oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! (Poe 498)

Not only is the narrator proud of how he treats the old man prior to the murder, but he also boasts about how he conceals the body:

The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse...I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye – not even his – could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out – no stain of any kind – no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all – ha! ha! (Poe 500)

Clearly, the narrator appreciates his crime. The narrator boasts of his accomplishments, which further proves that he is culpable. For instance, John A. Dern argues in “Poe’s Public Speakers” that the narrator “employs a wonderful variety of rhetorical and functional sentence types” (53) in the first few sentences that he utters. The narrator acknowledges some truth in the prosecutor’s claim – “True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am” – but also defends himself against the severity of the prosecutor’s claim to downplay his disease and gain social acceptance – “but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute” (Poe 498). Dern further

notes that the narrator's first few sentences are strategically spoken because they are patterned to cover the four functional types: "declarative, interrogative, exclamatory, and imperative" (55). After the narrator claims that his disease sharpens his senses, he says, "I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Harken! and observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (Poe 498). Because these sentences cover the four functional types, the narrator demonstrates that he can connect with his listeners at different levels – speaking, questioning, commanding – while displaying different levels of emotion. This ability to connect with his listeners and demonstrate emotion continues through his description of the murder and the concealment, which emphasize his appreciation of the crime and prove that he is culpable.

The narrator's mental illness causes him to obsess over the old man's eye. Though the decision to murder the old man is prompted by that obsession, the narrator is still morally and legally responsible for his crime. Not only can he distinguish between right and wrong, but he also can appreciate the violently methodical nature of the murder and concealment, thus proving that he cannot be not guilty on the ground of insanity. However, the narrator's mental instability ultimately convicts him. The murder and concealment of the body are well-worth appreciating, as the narrator artfully hides the evidence. The narrator is so confident in his crime that he invites the police to rest in the room wherein the body is buried. However, his mental illness manifests itself in the form of delusions of persecution, and he becomes obsessed with the dead old man's beating heart. He cannot move beyond the crime he commits. The narrator's confession – his downfall – is inevitable. Similarly, Poe's depression and alcoholism were aggravated by his obsession over the lost mother-images in his life. Also, the lack of support from the men in his life did not improve his depression or alcoholism. Poe could not move beyond mourning the loss

of those mother-images and struggling to thrive in the presence of such poor father-images. Poe craved positive, consistent relationships. When he could not find them, or was constantly separated from them, Poe's downfall – and his death – were inevitable.

## Chapter Four – The Obsessive Protagonist in “The Black Cat”

“As every cat owner knows, nobody owns a cat.”

- Ellen Perry Berkeley

Poe’s “The Black Cat” was published in an 1843 issue of the *United States Saturday Post*. Like the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator of “The Black Cat” suffers from mental instability, which leads to his destruction. This similarity is interesting considering the stories were published after Virginia was diagnosed and her health began declining (Quinn 347). Critics agree that the narrator of “The Black Cat” murders his wife, but there is some disagreement about whether the supernatural influences the crime. The narrator could accidentally murder his wife while attempting to murder a cat that has befriended his wife. This cat could incidentally be with the wife’s corpse when the narrator walls her up. However, the narrator could murder his wife while attempting to rid himself of a supernatural cat that haunts him. Furthermore, this supernatural cat could appear with the wife’s corpse behind the wall, intending to expose the narrator’s crime to the police. In “Untold Story: The Lying Narrator,” Susan Amper argues that “[t]his view...posits that unseen intelligent forces are at work in the story, actively cooperating to restore the moral order that the narrator’s crime has observed. Such an interpretation, while offering logical consistency, is far from satisfying. It seems entirely out of keeping with the psychological tenor of the tale and with the body of Poe’s work” (481). Many of Poe’s stories include elements construed as supernatural, but the cause of the allegedly supernatural elements is often psychological disturbance within the narrator. Many of the narrator’s symptoms indicate that he suffers from psychopathy. In “Fear and Trembling in Literature of the Fantastic,” Richard Badenhausen purports that the narrator presents his story in a calculated manner to achieve a certain response from his audience. While parts of the story

reflect truth, others are constructed to elicit sympathy for the narrator from the audience (Badenhausen 488). As the narrator recounts the murder of his wife, he could include supernatural elements within the story to appear less guilty, gain more sympathy, and psychologically distance himself from his crime. Since storytelling is one strength of psychopaths (Hester and Segir 179), the narrator easily could have constructed such a tale.

This chapter will examine the narrator's symptoms and argue that his condition is most closely comparable to psychopathy. The narrator's illness causes him to become obsessed with murdering the two black cats in his home, and his obsession ultimately results in his destruction. This chapter will also argue that the narrator used the strengths of his illness to elicit sympathy from his audience following his heinous crimes. However, regardless of the supernatural elements allegedly involved in the murder of his wife, the narrator is guilty as charged. The narrator cannot escape his death despite the stories he constructs. Similarly, Poe could not escape depression, alcoholism, and death despite the stories he constructed.

Once again, Poe was aware during his time as a writer of recently discovered psychological issues (Cleman 63), including psychopathy. Vicki Hester and Emily Segir argue in "The Black Cat' and Current Forensic Psychology" that psychopathy manifests itself in the narrator of "The Black Cat." Hester and Segir support their argument with *The Psychopathy Checklist*, developed by Dr. Robert D. Hare (1976). After thirty-five years of studying psychopathy, Hare published *Hare-Psychopathy Checklist Revised*, which has become a standard tool used by researchers and clinicians for diagnosing the illness ("Psychopathy Scales"). When someone who might be a psychopath is indicted for a violent crime, the checklist is also used in courtrooms to determine how much risk the person in question poses to others in psychiatric units or in prisons ("The Psychopathy Checklist"). While some mental illnesses are dangerous



for others beyond the person who is ill, Hare believes psychopathy to be especially dangerous: “Psychopaths are not disoriented or out of touch with reality, nor do they experience the delusions, hallucinations, or intense subjective distress that characterize most other mental disorders. Unlike psychotic individuals, psychopaths are rational and aware of what they are doing and why” (Hester and Segir 177). Because psychopaths are rational and aware of what they are doing, they can more easily mask their symptoms and concoct lies to mislead others. These symptoms include but are not limited to “superficial charm, cunning and manipulation, poor behavior controls, impulsivity, failure to accept responsibility for one’s own actions, and lack of remorse or guilt” (“The Psychopathy Checklist”). Throughout “The Black Cat,” the narrator displays all the aforementioned symptoms.

First, the narrator demonstrates superficial charm, cunning, and manipulation as he recounts the murder of his wife. The first sentences he utters are intended to convince the audience that he is not recounting the murder to prove his innocence, but rather to “unburden [his] soul” (Poe 531) from the guilt of his crime. By claiming that he needs to unburden his soul before dying the next day, the narrator pretends to accept responsibility for his crime. The narrator also states that he “neither expect[s] nor solicit[s] belief” because his “very senses reject their own evidence” (531). By claiming that he does not expect or solicit belief for the events that “have terrified – have tortured – have destroyed [him]” (531), he plays on the audience’s emotions to elicit sympathy. Furthermore, his use of the word “evidence” (531) makes the audience believe that the narrator is convinced that he is telling the truth and presenting facts.

Most would consider a man who murders his wife in cold blood to be a monster; the narrator tries to convince the audience that he is not a monster by implementing his superficial charm, cunning, and manipulation while describing his life-long love for animals (Poe 531).

Perhaps the narrator began loving animals so much because his “tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make [him] the jest of [his] companions” (531). Regardless of the cause, the narrator claims to be fonder of animals than he is of mankind, which he believes to be a positive aspect of his character: “There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere *Man*” (531). The narrator implements his charm and includes these details because the audience is more likely to sympathize with someone who was laughed at by his childhood peers as well as betrayed by his friends later in life – in other words, with someone who is a “victim” (Hester and Segir 185). The audience is also more likely to sympathize with someone who can display love, even if that love is directed toward an animal. The narrator overtly describes his “unselfish and self-sacrificing love” (531) toward the cat, Pluto. He further hints at this love by remembering Pluto affectionately as “a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree” and “my favorite pet and playmate” (531). Ed Piacentino notes in “Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ as Psychobiography” that “judgmental and self-defensive discourse” (859) is veiled underneath these claims. The narrator might appear to share these details about himself with no other motive than to emphasize his love for animals that stems from his docility and humaneness. However, Piacentino believes that the claims are shared to manipulate the audience’s perception of the narrator. If the narrator shares enough about his docility and humaneness, then the audience might not consider him capable of seriously pre-meditating the murder of his wife and cat; instead, the audience might consider it a spontaneous action spurred by whatever disease possesses him and, thus, not consider him completely responsible for the crime. The details of

his person, his past life, and his beloved cat are strategically divulged. The narrator implements his superficial charm, cunning, and manipulateness to gain favor with the audience.

Secondly, the narrator's murder of his cat and his wife, as well as his habits prior to the murders, demonstrate his poor behavior controls and impulsivity. The narrator's allegedly docile and humane disposition shifts after marrying his wife and owning Pluto:

I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them...my disease grew upon me – for what disease is like Alcohol. (Poe 532)

The narrator's shift in disposition could be a result of his alcohol consumption, or his alcohol consumption could be a response to the stressors in his life causing the shift in disposition. However, considering the narrator's psychopathic tendencies, including the ability to concoct stories that further his schemes, it is possible that the narrator lies about his former demeanor and shift in disposition. The audience might sympathize with him more if he convinces them that he was once a good man who became bad because of his circumstances. Either way, Badenhausen notes that the narrator does not attempt to discover "the real source of his psychic stress" (493) but is, instead, content to self-medicate. Despite any efforts to self-medicate, the alcohol only aggravates his poor behavior controls and impulsivity. His first act of violence occurs one night when he returns home intoxicated. Pluto avoids him because, as the narrator admits, even the beloved cat has become subject to his irritability (Poe 532). The narrator grabs Pluto, and Pluto bites his hand (532). At this point, the narrator loses control of his behavior and acts impulsively: "The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no

longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket” (532). Pluto heals over time, but as it continues to avoid the narrator, the narrator becomes even more angry towards it. He becomes obsessed with killing Pluto, “to continue and finally consummate the injury [he] had inflicted upon the unoffending brute” (533). Although the cat’s murder is pre-meditated, the fact that the narrator cannot quell his anger towards an “unoffending” brute and stop himself from “committing a sin – a deadly sin” (533) once again indicates that he cannot control his behavior.

Murdering Pluto does not solve the narrator’s problems; instead, it further reveals his psychopathic behavior by demonstrating his impulsiveness. He soon misses Pluto and wishes “for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place” (Poe 534). The narrator finds a cat that resembles Pluto physically, even missing one eye, but the new cat does not supply Pluto’s place because it connects with the narrator’s wife in a way that Pluto did not. Instead, the new cat “immediately became a great favorite with [his] wife” (534), which gradually causes the narrator to hate it. However, the cat does not neglect the narrator though it develops a relationship with the narrator’s wife. The cat still shows the narrator attention, but this attention becomes a constant source of irritation for the narrator. When the narrator finally harms the cat, his actions are impulsive and further demonstrate his poor behavior controls (536). The cat causes the narrator to almost fall down a flight of stairs, which “exasperated [him] to madness” (536). He lifts an axe to murder the cat, but his wife attempts to stop him: “I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the

interference, into a rage more than mechanical, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot” (536). Not only is the narrator unable to control his behavior so that he does not murder a cat, one which he wishes to have after Pluto is gone and shows him much affection overall, but he is also unable to separate the anger elicited by the cat from his feelings towards his wife. Consequently, he commits a sin far deadlier than killing Pluto.

Finally, the narrator both fails to take responsibility for the murder of his wife and completely lacks remorse. The narrator’s charm, cunning, and manipulation make the narrator’s words appear as if he takes responsibility and is remorseful – for instance, his claim that he recounts the murder of his wife to unburden his soul before his death feigns responsibility – but his subsequent argument proves otherwise. The narrator acknowledges that he acts violently towards his wife and his pets, but he blames that violence on his “disease” – alcoholism (Poe 532). He does not want his audience to believe that the violence is innate, but rather a symptom of a disease by which he is infected. How the narrator describes the crimes he commits indicates that something – the disease, perhaps – is responsible, instead of him. For instance, before he harms Pluto, he claims to be possessed by “the fury of a demon” (532); before he murders his wife, he claims to be overtaken by “a rage more than demoniacal” (536). Whether the narrator believes the alcohol to be responsible for his actions, or something greater and more supernatural, he negates responsibility. In addition, he does not feel remorse. While intoxicated, the narrator harms Pluto, and he claims to “blush...burn...shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity” (532). Despite this allegedly remorseful response to harming Pluto, the narrator sleeps well that night. He claims to feel remorse when he awakes the next morning, but that feeling is “at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched” (532). He does not

mention his feelings at all after murdering Pluto, nor does he after murdering his wife. Hester and Segir note that “[p]sychopaths see people as objects” (187), which explains why the narrator immediately begins hiding the evidence of the murder instead of responding to the loss of his wife. If the narrator merely sees his wife as an object, then her death is inconsequential and can only be met with practicality. The narrator walls up her corpse, and “[w]hen [he] had finished, [he] felt satisfied that all was right” (Poe 537). He redirects his focus to the next object in his life, the cat which he had failed to kill. When he cannot find the cat, he “soundly and tranquilly *slept*; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon [his] soul” (537). He does not even feel anxious or display guilt when the police come to search his house: “I quivered not a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence” (537). If the cat had not meowed when the narrator knocked upon the wall, the police would not have found the corpse and discovered the narrator’s crime. The narrator’s psychopathy fuels his obsession with murdering the cats and results in him walling up the second cat with his wife’s corpse, leading him to his demise. He attempts to mask his symptoms and concoct lies to mislead his audience, but the symptoms of his psychopathy and the flaws in his lies are determinable.

In addition to the theory of the narrator’s psychopathy, different theories consider the reasoning behind the narrator’s murder of his wife and cat, as well as theories about the supernatural elements included in the story. However, if the narrator’s symptoms indicate psychopathy, then the most reasonable explanation is that the narrator is rational and aware of what he says and does, and he purposefully invents the supernatural elements in his story to elicit sympathy from his audience. In “Animal Invasion,” Kirsten Møllegaard suggests that the narrator legitimately fears the cat, and his actions stem from that fear. She references Sigmund Freud’s discussion on the uncanny’s ability to draw forth “repressed infantile

complexes...pertaining to a host of neurotic fantasies about bodily pain and humiliation, such as the castration complex, the dread of being buried alive, dismemberment, being blinded, and other forms of body mutilation” (qtd. in Møllegaard). Therefore, Møllegaard theorizes that the uncanniness of the cat draws forth repressed infantile complexes from the narrator, which cause feelings of “depression, paranoia, and impotence”: “The narrator blames his wife for mentioning the superstition about black cats, but in fact it is he, not his wife, who in his own over-heated imagination loses his humanity, and hence his reason, out of sheer dread for the cat” (“Animal Invasion”). Despite her reasoning, Møllegaard’s theory is not consistent with the narrator’s behavior throughout the story. Although the narrator mentions feeling an “absolute *dread* of the beast” (Poe 535), his actions indicate that he does not feel threatened by the cat. He describes “an incumbent Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off – incumbent eternally upon my *heart*” (535), but his thoughts are not fearful. Instead, his thoughts are angry and malevolent: “Evil thoughts became my sole intimates – the darkest and most evil thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind” (535-36). Even after the narrator fails to murder the cat and cannot locate him, his thoughts are not fearful. Instead, he sleeps “soundly and tranquilly” (537) and remains calm until his crime is revealed. If he truly dreaded the beast, then he would not be able to shake the fearful thoughts while he is unaware of the cat’s location, especially since he no longer has his wife’s favor with the cat to rely upon. The narrator attempts to gain favor with his audience by convincing them that he fears the cat, but his behavior proves that he does not.

Piacentino also suggests that the cat draws forth “repressed infantile complexes” from the narrator, but that those complexes cause the narrator to act out of anger instead of out of fear (“Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ as Psychobiography”). Piacentino recalls the narrator’s mention of his

childhood, when his companions mocked him for his tender heart, especially towards animals. He goes on to theorize that the narrator murders his wife when she attempts to stop him from harming the cat because it causes him to recall the betrayal he met from his companions in childhood (“Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ as Psychobiography”). Even though his wife acts in opposition to the narrator in this moment, her action should have encouraged him to be tender of heart instead of mocking him for that tenderness. Furthermore, the narrator acts out of anger long before his wife acts in opposition to him. He becomes “more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others” (Poe 532) at the beginning of the story, and consequently harms Pluto while his wife is not involved. While there could be some truth to the Piacentino’s theory that the narrator murders his wife because of his “repressed infantile complexes” (153), the narrator’s anger clearly stems from something else, since his anger surfaces with no apparent trigger.

Critics argue the purpose of the second cat in the narrator’s story. For instance, Amper suggests that the narrator intends to kill his wife all along, and he includes the cats in his story only “to ease his own sense of guilt, and to shield him from prosecution for murder” (479). Amper is correct in stating that the cats are not included in the narrator’s story because they are a factual part of what occurs, but rather because the inclusion of the cat’s supernatural elements fulfills an ulterior purpose for the narrator. However, that purpose is not to ease his own sense of guilt since the narrator feels no guilt for his crimes. As argued earlier, the narrator pretends to accept responsibility at the beginning of the story, but does not actually accept responsibility. He highlights the “docility and humanity of [his] disposition” (Poe 531), as well as his life-long love for animals. He makes statements about feeling remorse for harming his animals, but even acknowledges that those feelings are “at best...feeble and equivocal” (532). He repeatedly



blames his actions on his disease, the “spirit of PERVERSENESS,” and the “fury of a demon” which possesses him before he commits his crimes (532). He does not respond emotionally to the death of his wife, instead practically and with the intention of hiding the evidence (536). Finally, he rests well the night after murdering his wife and is completely calm until the cat meows from behind the wall, thus revealing the murder (537). He clearly does not feel remorse for his crimes, which is symptomatic of his psychopathy, so he has no reason to lie to ease his own sense of guilt. Instead, he invents the second cat and its supernatural elements to gain favor with his audience. Perhaps the second cat is a doppelganger of Pluto who supernaturally disappears following the murder of the narrator’s wife, and perhaps the cat supernaturally reappears behind the wall where the wife’s corpse is buried and reveals the narrator’s crime to the police. However, as Amper notes, these supernatural explanations are not in alignment with “the psychological tenor of the tale and with the body of Poe’s work” (481). A psychological explanation is much more fitting. The narrator fabricates a story, something that is easy for a psychopath to do, and invents this second cat and its supernatural elements – resembling Pluto, disappearing from the narrator, and reappearing behind a sealed wall – to gain favor with the audience.

The narrator attempts to convince his audience that he feared the cats and is not responsible for his crimes because of his disease and the spirit of perverseness that possessed him, so that they might sympathize with him in the final moments before his death. Despite his attempts to mask his symptoms and concoct lies to persuade his audience, his true purpose is determinable. He is mentally ill – a psychopath whose obsession with murdering his cats leads to his downfall. He cannot escape his sentence – his death – no matter how rational and aware he is or how well he utilizes the strengths of his illness. Similarly, Poe could not escape his downfall.

He could not move beyond mourning the loss of the mother-images in his life, despite the stories he concocted and their success. He kept searching for his lost mother-image in various women even after Virginia's death, such as Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman (Quinn 579), until his obsession ruined him. The more mother-images he lost, the more dependent Poe was on alcohol and the less mentally stable he became. Finally, his mental instability pushed him to a psychological breakdown in the days before his death. Through the stories, Poe's fate was determinable. His obsession would lead to his destruction – his death.

### Conclusion

“To say that Edgar Poe has been the least understood of America’s major writers would invite a fruitless debate, but surely no one will deny that he has been the most misunderstood. What other figure in our literature has been so persistently, so pertinaciously, so perversely misrepresented by biographers and critics alike?”

- Robert Regan, *POE*

There is a relationship between the world in Edgar Allan Poe’s stories and the world in which Poe lived. The meaning of Poe’s stories, which is often scrutinized, becomes clearer through an examination of Poe’s life. Death and destruction pervaded both Poe’s life and his literature. Furthermore, death and destruction commonly occur in Poe’s literature because of the mental instability and obsession of his narrators. Unfortunately, Poe lost his mother when he was two years old, so he never established a secure relationship with her. Nevertheless, he did develop a positive idea of her. According to Attachment Theory, a child’s loss of his or her caregiver at a young age impacts how the child interacts in future relationships, particularly romantic relationships. Because Poe had a positive idea of his mother, he projected that positive mother-image onto other women with whom he formed relationships (Snyder, et al. 710). However, these women did not remain in Poe’s life for long. Some were unable to remain in his life because of their circumstances, such as Poe’s first love, S. Elmire Royster, whose father disapproved of his daughter’s love affair with Poe (Pruette). Others did not remain in Poe’s life because they were subject to a premature death, such as his beloved wife, Virginia Clemm (Quinn 527). Whatever the reason, Poe lost many significant women throughout the course of his life. When he lost them, he also lost the positive mother-image associated with them.

Eventually, the many losses aggravated Poe's depression, consequently aggravating his alcoholism and resulting in his mental instability and death.

Poe's mental instability and ultimate demise is comparable to that of his narrators. Poe is distinct from his narrators; however, he identified with his narrators because they responded to conflict in the same way. Poe did not respond well to the loss of women in his life, which was also the repeated loss of his mother-image. His narrators respond similarly to their obsessions in their respective stories. Because Poe and his narrators view and respond to situations similarly, the narrators' ultimate destructions, a result of their obsessions, foreshadowed Poe's own destruction. This foreshadowing is a utilization of the literary technique prolepsis, defined by Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* as "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (40). Though prolepsis might be found in multiple Poe stories, it is specifically found in the four stories "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat." The narrators in each of these stories is mentally unstable, obsessive, and ultimately destroyed.

The narrator of "Ligeia" is obsessed with his dead first wife, Ligeia. His obsession results in an opium addiction, which causes the narrator to hallucinate his second wife, Rowena, transforming into Ligeia upon her deathbed. Though the narrator of "Ligeia" is not definitively destroyed at the end of the story, Poe's addition of the poem "The Conqueror Worm" in subsequent publications hints at the story's resolution. This poem depicts how the worm – death – does not consider one's resolve to live. Instead, it inescapably conquers humanity. The narrator's obsession with Ligeia is his downfall. Secondly, the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is obsessed with the declining mental health of Roderick Usher and the decay of the Usher mansion. Like "Ligeia," the narrator of "Usher" is not definitively destroyed at the end of

the story. However, Poe's addition of the poem "The Haunted Palace" in subsequent publications hints that there is no recovery for Usher, the mansion, or the narrator. The longer the narrator exposes himself to the strange happenings within the mansion, the more mentally unstable he becomes. The narrator's obsession aggravates his own declining mental health and leads to his downfall. Thirdly, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is obsessed with the old man's eye, which prompts the narrator to murder the old man. Because the narrator suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, he experiences auditory hallucinations of the dead old man's heart beating from underneath the floorboards where he is buried. He then becomes obsessed with these auditory hallucinations, eventually confessing to his crime. His obsession with the eye and the auditory hallucinations of the heart are his downfall. Finally, the narrator of "The Black Cat" is obsessed with his black cat, Pluto. This obsession aggravates his psychopathic symptoms and eventually leads to the murder of the cat as well as the murder of his wife. When the narrator recounts the crime, his psychopathy prompts him to fabricate the details of the wife's murder and include supernatural elements – a second black cat who closely resembles Pluto – to gain favor from the audience. Regardless of his attempts, the narrator's true purpose is determinable. His obsession with Pluto and covering up the true motive of his crime ultimately lead to his downfall.

Poe did not purposefully utilize prolepsis in his narratives. However, because of his experiences and how he continually responded to them, he developed a certain perspective of situations like his own. Therefore, when Poe created his story-worlds, he subconsciously created characters that respond from that certain perspective. The narrators in "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Ligeia" are so fixated on certain persons or things within their stories that they are unable to find happiness – or worth, for that matter – apart from their fixations. They are ultimately driven to complete insanity and

subsequent demise. Because Poe could not find true happiness or worth apart from the women in his life whom he loved, he was unable to move past their loss. He was ultimately driven to mental instability and alcoholism, which contributed to his unfortunate death. Although it is too late to understand these works of literary genius and use that understanding to help Poe process his thoughts and feelings, it is not too late to use that understanding to help others who are still struggling with similar symptoms.

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