

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN POE'S IMAGERY  
AND HIS VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE

An abstract of a Thesis by  
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Poe's images in both his prose and his poetry are closely related to his concept of the universe and man's position in it. The images suggest many of the ideas Poe presents in Eureka.

Much of the preparation for this thesis was involved with a careful reading of Poe's work. His critical writing, especially Eureka, was studied in an attempt to make some basic observations about his philosophy. His prose and poetry were then viewed in light of his basic philosophical assumptions. Conclusions were then drawn regarding the appropriateness of Poe's images for his central themes. Secondary sources were consulted either to expand or substantiate some of the arguments of the thesis.

Poe describes the universe in terms of repulsion and attraction, forces that work on both the physical and the spiritual dimensions. Repulsion has caused a moving away from unity; consequently, Poe's images reflect the superiority of the past and the inferiority of man's present condition. However, the attractive force sends all in the direction of unity and, therefore, is associated with positive images. In addition, Poe's images suggest man's quest for spiritual understanding and his attempt to reconcile the demands of his body with the demands of his soul.

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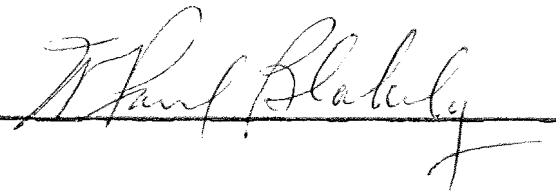
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## Poe's Quest for Order

Edgar Allan Poe's work has many dimensions. It consists of criticism, essays, poetry, and, of course, fiction. If these various genres are carefully inspected, Poe's genius becomes readily apparent. He is undeniably an artist dealing in a complex art. Nevertheless, much of Poe's imaginative work, specifically his poetry and his tales of terror, has been misunderstood. This aspect of his work has often been regarded as effect for its own sake. However, such an interpretation is obviously unfair to Poe, a man who speaks of much greater concepts in his critical works and who demonstrates an undeniable artistic subtlety in his fiction. The terror which Poe deals with in his prose and poetry is only a facet of his work, certainly not the heart of his work. Its importance is of a secondary nature. What is much more important is an understanding of Poe's total philosophy and of how this philosophy is reflected in his writing.

Certainly, much of Poe's work is allegorical or symbolic. Viewed carefully, Poe's concept of the universe and man's position in the universe can be seen clearly beneath the more obvious terror, death, and destruction which are so often the subjects of his work. It is the intent of this paper to show that Poe's imagery is closely related to his philosophy of the universe and, in fact,

that a study of Poe's imagery can shed considerable light on the meaning of his prose and poetry. It is not the intent of this paper to account for every image Poe used or to justify the artistic value of his imagery. However, it will be shown that Poe's images do relate significantly to his attitudes and that they are not present merely for the sake of effect.

Poe's basic attitudes undoubtedly were largely shaped by his difficult childhood. As a result of his unfortunate youth clouded by the loss of his father and the death of his mother, he felt alienated and rejected.<sup>1</sup> Although Poe was taken in by the John Allan family, his life with the Allans was far from satisfactory. Hervey Allen suggests that Poe's difficulties were beginning even during the apparently happy years of his childhood with the Allans and argues that this fact was a shaping influence on Poe's philosophy of life. If Poe had been legally adopted, Hervey Allen maintains, "it is possible that the feeling of eating the bread of strangers, of being an object of charity, of which fact he was often reminded, it is quite possible that this feeling of inferiority against which he built up an almost morbid pride, destined to be one of the controlling factors in his character, never would have been

<sup>1</sup>It is not certain whether Edgar's father, David Poe, died or abandoned his family.

present at all or would have vanished as time went on."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Poe was not totally accepted by Allan; and, as a result, his early life was filled with feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. This instability must have deepened as Poe aged, for he constantly met with failure and rejection. Time after time his love affairs ended tragically. As a result, his world never quite fitted together properly, and this highly sensitive man was consequently haunted by feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The tragic events of Poe's later life have led many to the popular opinion that Poe was some sort of madman who produced his works while caught up in a type of frenzied maniacal rage. This opinion, however, would seem far from the truth when a detailed study is made of Poe's art and criticism. Rather than an uncontrolled scribbler, Poe is seen as one of the most logical and organized of writers. He has, in fact, an almost mathematical passion for control in his work. His fascination with the ratiocinative tale and much of his discussion on the skill of writing point to this fact. "The Philosophy of Composition," for instance, emphasizes Poe's concern for precision and organization in writing. He argues that the length of a literary work is critical. If it is too long to be read in one sitting,

<sup>2</sup>Hervey Allen, Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1934), pp. 42-43.

"unity of effect" is violated.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the full impact of the work is lost. Poe goes on to discuss the necessity for "rendering the work universally appreciable" (p. 814) and with this in mind asserts that Beauty is the true province of the poetic form. As he comments on the construction of "The Raven," he emphasizes the very logical and ordered fashion in which the work was assembled. Diction, the appropriateness of the refrain, and the special significance of the raven itself all are discussed. A detailed analysis of "The Philosophy of Composition" is not highly essential to the purpose of this paper. However, the brief comments provided above clearly indicate the controlled quality of Poe's work. Furthermore, if Poe's work may be viewed as a conscious effort at art, which it is, it can be validly interpreted as representative of his attitudes and philosophy.

#### Eureka: Poe's View of the Universe

Poe's attempt to explain existence in perhaps the most logical way is evidenced in Eureka. Critical opinion toward Eureka varies. Some view it simply as the product of a diseased romantic mind. Those holding this view see the unusual combination of science, pseudo-science, and

<sup>3</sup>Hervey Allen, ed., The Works of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: P. F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1927), p. 813. All references made to Poe's work will relate to this volume.



philosophy as worthless or nearly worthless. However, Poe maintained that Eureka was his masterpiece, a poem of truth. In it he believed he had answered some of the great questions of the universe. Certainly, the task he undertook in this work was monumental. It was his intention "to speak of the Physical, Metaphysical, and Mathematical--of the Material and Spiritual Universe: of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its present Condition, and its Destiny" (p. 821). While the value of Eureka is probably not nearly what Poe ascertained it to be, it is not worthless droning either. In fact, what Poe put down on paper in Eureka is what he undoubtedly was working toward in his fiction. If the ideas and attitudes in Eureka are inspected, Poe's fascination with various images becomes understandable, and consequently a further dimension is added to his work.

In Eureka Poe explains that his universe is a dynamic one and is characterized by repulsive and attractive forces. The repulsive force Poe calls heat or electricity; the attractive force he calls gravitation. He argues that the first created thing was Matter characterized by Simplicity. The chief characteristic of this Matter was Oneness (pp. 832-835). However, the repulsive force of the universe, initiated by the Volition of God, diffused this symmetrical source, sending it outward. Thus, the universe became more and more complex as its original state of Oneness was lost. Yet, Poe explains that the repulsive force of the universe

is no longer dominant. Its major thrust has come to a halt, and presently each particle of the universe is striving to return to Unity, each atom is struggling toward every other atom. While this centripetal urge is strong, the particles of matter are prevented from immediately returning to Oneness by the very resistance which defines their separate-ness. This resistance Poe identifies as electricity and maintains that it is a force provided by God to give his universe duration. Nevertheless, the electrical force remains subordinate to that of gravitation; and, consequently, the dominant movement of matter is toward the simplicity of its origin, toward Unity. Furthermore, Poe maintains that the gravitational force, the tendency to return to Unity, has resulted in atoms clustering to form heterogeneous bodies. In this sense, all Matter moves toward Unity. It is significant that there is no specific geographical center to which the atoms are moving. Poe argues that "their source lies in the principle of Unity. This they seek always--immediately--in all directions" (p. 839).

It is essential to understand that Poe's explanation of the universe relates to its spiritual dimensions as well as its physical dimensions. As Edward Davidson points out, thought in man functions in the same way as the mechanism of the universe. Thinking is the conscious paralleling of

the individual thought with the universal direction.<sup>4</sup> As is the material universe, so is the human mind continually expressing its tendency to return to Unity. In fact, Poe argues that man's feelings of futility, ignorance, and insignificance, as well as his constant search for a perfection he cannot find, are proof positive that "the spiritual, coincident with the material, struggles toward the original Unity" (p. 889).

#### Man's Limited Condition

Certainly, portraits of man's inadequacy characterize much of Poe's work. Often the persona is presented grappling with the terrible realization that his understanding of existence is merely superficial. Although he struggles toward "original Unity," his inability to grasp it results in his tormented state of mind. In "Israfel" the persona laments his limitations as an earthly being. He bemoans the fact that "This/Is a world of sweets and sours;/Our flowers are merely flowers." Reality, as perceived on earth, is inadequate, for it is removed from the total awareness found in Unity. Could the persona in this poem realize spiritual Unity and dwell in Heaven "Where Israfel/Hath dwelt," he would have become a greater poet. Indeed, this

<sup>4</sup>Edward H. Davidson, Poe, A Critical Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 229-231.

is a logical conclusion when considered with respect to Poe's cosmic order. The poet who can attain spiritual Unity or who can at least move close to it, moves closer to the perfection found in the original Oneness. In his poem "For Annie" Poe again evidences his thoughts about the futility and insignificance of physical life. Although the persona of this poem has experienced physical death, he comments that his "heart it is brighter/Than all of the many/Stars in the sky." While others "shudder" at his form, he rejoices that his worldly existence has expired, stating that "the lingering illness/Is over at last--/And the fever called 'Living'/Is conquered at last." In death the speaker of the poem has been liberated, for he is now more perfectly filled "with the light/Of the love of my Annie." In essence, he has moved closer to the goal of perfection through a unification with his lover.

Man's torment concerning the limited nature of his being is expressed in nearly all of Poe's poetry and, although somewhat more subtly, in much of his fiction. The narrator of "A Dream Within a Dream" asks is "all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?" The narrator of "Berenice" is so haunted by his feelings of isolation, so driven by his quest for meaning, that he commits the hideous act of extracting the teeth of his dead cousin. He himself says that "He is a man addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation" (p. 314). Furthermore, many

of Poe's tales of terror can be discussed as studies in self-annihilation. When this point is discussed later in this paper, it will be demonstrated in depth that the persona often murders in order to destroy himself. The murdered individual is simply the killer's internalized self represented in tangible form. Thus, the slaying is enacted in order to alleviate the murderer's own feelings of guilt or insignificance. In doing so, he is at least temporarily correcting the fragmentary quality of his world.

This spiritual return to Unity seems to have been one of the driving compulsions in Poe's life. Poe's mind sought to find the simple essence of life just as the universe sought to return to its simple origin. A return to Unity for Poe would provide meaning in a world which must have seemed at times inexplicable; a return to Unity would provide understanding in a world which treated him harshly. If Poe were able to come to grips with the essence of life, he seemed to believe that life would no longer appear purposeless, painful, or futile (p. 889).

#### The Idealized Past and Images of Gold

Since Poe's spiritual nature mirrors the physical nature of the universe, it is not surprising to discover that Poe found the past far superior to the present. The past for Poe represents the time when life was more valuable because it was more ordered. It was a time when Unity had

not been scattered by the repulsive force of existence. Since it was closer to perfect Oneness, the past is idealized by Poe in his work. Yet, while Poe's fiction and verse demonstrate that he is attempting to regain this lost perfection of the past, he is unable to do so entirely. Even though he attempts to move in the direction of Unity, this is a painfully slow process. Therefore, the world remains for him a fallen place, a place lacking its former grandeur. These concepts are clearly represented in Poe's imagery. His images of the past, often images of gold, reflect his idealized notion of a time that is no more.

In his poem "Lenore" Poe begins with a lament concerning the death of a young woman. With her death, life seemingly has lost a great deal. The world is no longer what it was, for Poe says in his opening line, "broken is the golden bowl!" It is also interesting to note that Lenore was a golden-haired woman, and that although death was apparent in her eyes, her golden hair seems to retain some dimension of life. It seems to have become symbolic of her pure and perfect past now vanished.

In "The Coliseum" Poe develops some striking contrasts between the noble past and the decadent present through his images. Where at one time the "mimic eagle glared in gold" the "swarthy bat" now reigns. Once the "gilded hair" of the Roman women waved in the wind. Now "reed and thistle" wave ignobly. Finally, the "golden throne" of the monarch has

been supplanted by "spectre-like" lizards scurrying across the dimly lighted stones. Although Poe concludes somewhat positively that not all this former grandeur has been lost forever, it is certain that the greatest age has passed for Poe and that it is only by looking back in time that the real value in life can be discovered.

"A Dream Within a Dream" stands as one of Poe's most straightforward yet haunting works. Once more, the image of gold is used to depict the tragedy of man's present predicament. The narrator stands alone on a "surf-tormented shore" amid the roar of the crashing ocean. In his hand the solitary figure holds the "golden grains" of sand, but regardless of how tightly he grasps the particles, they continue to creep through his fingers and slide irretrievably into the merciless sea. Once again Poe seems to suggest the value of life slipping away from him, tragically. Once again the image of gold suggests lost value.

#### The Present and Images of Wrongness

As a result, Poe is left with a world which is decaying and sinister. While Poe does express some optimism concerning his view of the world in Eureka, Patrick Quinn argues that Poe's images often reflect his notion that man and the natural world are inherently evil.<sup>5</sup> Since Poe did

<sup>5</sup>Patrick F. Quinn, The French Face of Edgar Poe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), p. 192.

see the world as a fallen place, Quinn's statement is perfectly logical. In Poe's only novel, The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym, Quinn's point is dramatically illustrated. As Pym's fantastic journey unfolds, the young boy finds himself surrounded by a physical world which is entirely out of step with that which is "normal." There apparently is a fundamental wrongness about life, a wrongness which seems to become more and more apparent to Pym as he inspects it more and more closely. He discovers trees, for instance, resembling no species characteristic of earth as he knew it. Rocks are described as being "novel in mass, colour, and their stratification." In addition, the streams of Pym's world defy nature's laws. The water consists of definitely defined "veins," each of which is characterized by its own distinct hue. While the particles of the individual veins are cohesive, Pym mentions that the veins can be separated by simply placing a knife between them (p. 526).

Certainly, Pym's adventures represent one of Poe's most fantastic narratives. It would seem that a work such as this, so bound up in the incredible, must almost definitely be interpreted as a symbolic expression of Poe's view of life. If this novel is viewed in this light, it strongly suggests the contention that Poe sees Earth as mysterious and unexplainable, filled with evil and terrifying forces.

Unquestionably, Poe's convictions about the basic "wrongness" of the world came about largely as a result of



his tragic experiences with love. It is not surprising that the writer sees an inherent evil in a universe which treated him harshly. Certainly, the death of his mother, of Mrs. John Allan, and of his wife, Virginia, were shaping influences on his basically negative attitude toward life. Seemingly, the world was unsatisfactory for Poe because it imposed temporal limitations on love. Love's total fulfillment could only be realized in death when souls were eternally united. This is the type of situation which exists in "Annabel Lee." The narrator states that even though his love has been taken from him "neither the angels in heaven above,/Nor the demons down under the sea,/Can ever dissever my soul from the soul/Of the beautiful Annabel Lee."

With this point in mind, it seems logical that images of wrongness can be found in many of the poems where Poe speaks of death. Through this type of image, Poe is suggesting the imperfection of worldly existence. In "To One in Paradise" the narrator's love has died. Pathetically, their earthly relationship is "No more--no more--no more." These words, the poet states, and naturally the tragedy which these words depict have the power of holding "the solemn sea/To the sands upon the shore." Thus, this awful image of a motionless sea comes to suggest the death of the girl. The image represents, therefore, a situation which should not be. Both the totally silent sea and the death of the narrator's lover suggest a fundamental misdirection of

the natural forces.

In "Dreamland" the subject of death is also dealt with. Again, images of a disrupted natural world are used in conjunction with the death theme. In this world that lies "Out of Space--out of Time" the images deal with a total upheaval of the natural world:

Mountains toppling evermore  
 Into seas without a shore;  
 Seas that restlessly aspire,  
 Surging, unto skies of fire;  
 Lakes that endlessly outspread  
 Their lone waters--lone and dead,  
 Their still waters--still and chilly  
 With the snows of the lolling lily.

Once again the image of the silent body of water is used, a body of water which is "dead" and "chilly" as death itself. Mountains falling into shoreless seas which simultaneously surge into skies of fire provide further dramatic images of a misdirected universe, one in which death dwells.

Poe also uses the image of the motionless body of water in "Eulalie." Again his purpose is to suggest the meaninglessness or wrongness of the natural world without love. Before the narrator of this poem takes the "yellow-haired young Eulalie" for his bride, he metaphorically speaks of his soul as a "stagnant tide." Once again the conclusion can be drawn that the physical world is painful, evil, and

without value or purpose. Love seems to be a temporary escape from this world, but it is only temporary. Death ultimately emphasizes the wrongness of life.

At times, imagery suggesting Poe's vision of a disordered universe is quite subtle. To illustrate this point E. A. Robinson cites "The Fall of the House of Usher." As the narrator studies the Usher mansion, he mentions that "Its principal feature seemed to be that of excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled webwork from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaption of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones" (p. 275). This very inconsistency, Robinson argues, is the first hint of disorder.<sup>6</sup> In this manner, the mansion serves as a tangible image of the disorder of Roderick's mind.

Klaus Lubbers asserts that Poe uses images of sound to indicate the disorganized state of the universe. Lubbers maintains that Poe reveals the present disharmony of the cosmic order by comparing it to the past, a time when the ordered nature of the universe was represented by the music of the spheres. Poe uses the once popular notion that when

<sup>6</sup>E. A. Robinson, "Order and Sentience in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" PMLA, 76 (March, 1961), 70.

the celestial bodies turned properly in their orbits, they generated an audible melody. This harmonious music in turn symbolized the harmonious condition of the universe. However, Poe laments that this ideal state no longer exists.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the orchestra in "The Conqueror Worm" blows "fitfully." It is spasmodic, violent, and intermittent rather than melodious. In "The Haunted Palace" the "lute's well-tuned law" has given way to a "discordant melody." Thus, in both poems the harmonious music of the spheres has been supplanted by the abrasive discord of the present.

In "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" Poe attacks what he calls the "rough pedants" (p. 260) of the world whose emphasis on practical science and industrialization has left the surface of the planet ravaged. Even in this primarily philosophical work, Poe incorporates some striking contrasting images to illustrate his argument. The past is referred to through positive images. It is portrayed as a time "when blue rivers ran undammed, between hills unhewn, into far forest solitudes, primeval, odorous, and unexplored" (p. 260). On the other hand, the present is associated with images of wrongness, images which reveal a deformity of the pristine past. Now the landscape is characterized by "smoking cities" and the "hot breath of furnaces" (p. 260).

<sup>7</sup>Klaus Lubbers, "Poe's 'The Conqueror Worm,'" American Literature, 39 (November, 1967), 378.

In his poem "Sonnet--To Science" Poe again attacks the "dull realities" of the scientific approach. As in the case in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," his images again reveal a flawed world. Science, the persona laments, has "dragged Diana from her car" . . . "driven the Hamadryad from the wood" . . . "torn the Naiad from her flood" . . . and "the Elfin from the green grass." Hence, science is generating the process of separation rather than unification. By doing so, it becomes a destructive force in Poe's mind.

#### Images of Submergence: A Confrontation With Death

The primary conclusion that has been drawn to this point is that Poe rejected the world of the present for what he saw as an ideal past when all was nearer to the characteristic of "Oneness." Consequently, he longed for unification with what he termed the "Particle Proper" (p. 833). However, if man were to return to his spiritual beginnings, if he were to really come to grips with the meaning of life, it was vital that he must know the nature of death and, more significantly, that which existed beyond the grave. As a result, Poe's spiritual return to Unity could only be accomplished totally through his death. Yet, Poe seems to have been caught up in a conflict between these demands of his soul for understanding, which were undeniably tremendous, and the demands of his body. While his soul longed for total unification and a subsequent understanding of death, Poe

simultaneously dreaded the thought of annihilation. Consequently, the images of Poe suggest both his desire to approach death or to actually be buried alive as well as his deep fear of his destruction.

There are a number of images in Poe's work which suggest some sort of submergence. Many times the characters who are submerged appear to change as a result of their experience. For having gone through it, they seem to gain a new or deeper insight into life's mystery. It is suggested that these characters are acting out Poe's own desire to approach the spiritual core of life by confronting death. Thus, the submergence image may be a symbolic burial. Poe's fascination with the image of submergence represents his fascination with physical death itself. The presence of these images reinforces the notion that Poe was seeking to go beneath the surface of life in order to understand its spiritual dimensions.

In The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym the boy's supernatural voyage nearly does not occur for Pym immediately gets trapped beneath the deck of the ship on which he is a stowaway. In a sense, he begins his journey of enlightenment by being buried alive. The textual evidence supporting this notion of entombment is strong. Augustus tells Pym that he has been "buried" (p. 443). Later, Pym attempts "to reason on the probable cause of my being entombed" (p. 447). Furthermore, in his moment of release from this predicament

he feels like one "suddenly redeemed from the jaws of the tomb" (p. 454). Finally, the packing case in which he is sealed is "an iron-bound box . . . full six feet long, but very narrow" (p. 442). The fact that this is a symbolic coffin seems undeniable.<sup>8</sup> Pym's experience is in keeping with Poe's general philosophy, for he seems to suggest that any totally genuine understanding of life must be accompanied by death. Once again, one of the basic arguments of Eureka is evidenced in Poe's fiction.

Poe's fascination with submergence and symbolic death is further illustrated in "A Descent into a Maelström." In this story the submergence is accomplished by having the narrator slide deeper and deeper into a furiously spinning funnel of water. As he moves down the wall of the maelström, he simultaneously is moving closer to his death. Curiously, however, the apparent victim of the whirlpool reacts in a quite different way than might be expected normally. Rather than fearing his fate, he longs for it:

It may appear strange, but now, when we were in the very jaws of the gulf, I felt more composed than when we were only approaching it. Having made up my mind to hope no more, I got rid of a great deal of that terror which unmanned me at first. I supposed it

<sup>8</sup>Walter E. Bezanson, "The Troubled Sleep of Arthur Gordon Pym," in Essays in Literary History, ed. R. Kirk and C. F. Main (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960), pp. 157-58.

was despair that strung my nerves.

It may look like boasting--but what I tell you is the truth--I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power. I do believe that I blushed with shame when this idea crossed my mind. After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a wish to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see.

(pp. 562-63)

The positive wish that the narrator felt, it will be argued, was more than just a desire to find what lay at the base of the funnel. Rather, it can be interpreted as a wish to find meaning in death. The feeling of calm experienced by the character is, in view of Eureka, both logical and plausible, for in this situation, the narrator is simultaneously moving toward a physical center, represented by his movement down the wall of the whirlpool, and a spiritual center, represented by his anticipated death. He is, therefore, moving toward total unity and subsequent spiritual peace.

An inspection of other Poe tales reveals that death or



the threat of death is often accompanied by submergence. In "The Black Cat" the body of the murdered wife is walled in a cellar; consequently, the narrator confronts his terrifying ordeal with death below ground. He grapples with the reality of his wife's death in his own symbolic coffin, the cellar. Similarly, Madeline Usher's tomb is said to be at "great depth" (p. 282). Since it was her brother, Roderick, who buried her there, it was necessary for him to descend into the earth, in a sense, to do so. Furthermore, it is important to note that Roderick and Madeline are twins. Thus, in burying his sister Roderick symbolically buries himself. The cries and hideous noises from the tomb are symbolically those of Roderick. Finally, the notion that Roderick is symbolically buried is re-inforced by the rather enigmatic painting which he has done. In reference to this work of art the narrator notes that "Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth" (p. 279). If this picture is interpreted as Roderick's reflection of himself, it most certainly represents his spiritual entombment.

In "The Cask of Amontillado" Montresor walls up Fortunato in the extensive catacombs of the Montresor family. Two points are highly significant here. First, this scene also makes use of the submergence image. Montresor notes the manner in which he led his victim "down" to his doom:

"I passed down a long and winding staircase, requesting him to be cautious as he followed. We came at length to the foot of the descent, and stood together on the damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors" (p. 206). Later in their journey the two men descend even deeper into the earth: "We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame" (p. 207). Second, the similarity between the characters of Montresor and Fortunato is essential to the understanding of the story. The former announces that he has been the victim of a "thousand injuries of Fortunato" (p. 205). Now, however, Fortunato has insulted him, and he has vowed revenge. The significant point here is that there actually seems little cause for revenge. Montresor says, in fact, that Fortunato was a man worthy of respect. He also points out that in the area of tasting wine Fortunato "did not differ from him materially" (p. 205).

Fortunato's chief sin seems to have been his pride, and yet even in this respect he did not differ greatly from Montresor, for Montresor views himself as rather a superior being also. This attitude is quite evident when he states, with reference to Fortunato, that "Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit" (p. 205). Consequently, "The Cask of Amontillado" is similar to "The Fall of the House of Usher" in that both tales deal with a type of symbolic suicide. In

both instances the narrator experiences death vicariously by burying what is actually his symbolic self. When Poe utilizes images of descent, he seems to be suggesting that the principal character of the work is confronting the meaning of death itself.

A final short story which illustrates this same notion is "The Pit and the Pendulum." Images relating to descent fill this tale. The narrator mentions that when he was in the judgment room "all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent of the soul into Hades" (p. 171). He then relates how he was taken "in silence down--down--still down--till a hideous dizziness oppressed me at the mere interminableness of the descent" (p. 172). There is also, of course, the pit in the center of the captive's room, a sort of yawning grave into which he almost falls. Finally, there is the pendulum descending rhythmically from the room's ceiling. Had it descended totally, it would have resulted in the narrator's death. Therefore, the narrator again experienced the emotional aspects of the approaching grave. As is the case in "A Descent into the Maelström," the narrator literally descends toward death.

#### Images Suggesting Life's Transient Quality

While Poe's longing for the knowledge and the tranquility of the grave is strong, he is simultaneously afraid of death. Although attracted to the notion of spiritual

unification, it appears that he is deeply upset by the restrictions of man's mortality. This, then, seems to be a major contradiction in Poe. While he longs for the grave, he also laments the temporal quality of existence. Often his characters are attempting to retain their mortal selves, to preserve something of their temporal world. Consistently, however, they fail in this quest as time and often death impose themselves on the individuals.

Often Poe uses the aural image of the striking clock to symbolize the end of the transient quality of life. In "The Masque of the Red Death" a group of people, led by Prince Prospero, have retreated from the world of death and decay, locking themselves up in an artificial world of happiness. They refuse to look at the reality of their situation. However, in this setting the image of the large ebony clock looms ominously. Whenever the clock strikes the hour, the people start from some vague fear, and all motion ceases. The meaning of this aural image is very clear; it is a reminder of the people's mortality, it is an overt signal that time is passing and consequently death is approaching. Their masquerade has been unsuccessful in halting it. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" Poe again uses the terrifying image of the clock to reveal the reality of the situation. As the murderer of the innocent old man sits over the buried body, the ticking of his own watch grows increasingly louder and more tormenting. Ultimately, the

sensitive nature of the murderer causes him to identify the ticking with the beating of the dead man's heart, and in a fit of mad rage, he is forced to confess his hideous crime. In both this story and "The Masque of the Red Death" the sound of the clock horrifies, for in both cases it serves as a reminder that the attempt to disguise reality has been futile. While this image is not as intricately used in "The Assigination," it does appear in that tale. The story depicts a romantic love which cannot possibly exist permanently in this world. In fact, permanence can only be achieved in death; consequently, the story ends with a rather dramatic suicide. Poe again seems to underscore his theme by having the great clock on the Piazza strike the hour at the beginning of the tale. Once again, the striking clock represents man's limitations in the temporal world.

Obviously, the clock or watch is an appropriate image to represent the relentless passage of time. Characterized by its continual and consistent movement, its permanence serves as a warning of the impermanence of worldly existence. Therefore, Poe wisely uses the timepiece to reflect the notion that there is something far superior to man's brief lifetime.

It appears that Poe has sought and found an image comparable to the watch in the world of nature. That image is the sounding wave. Like the striking clock, the wave breaks consistently and eternally. Thus, when Poe compares

man's life to the wave concept, he is overwhelmed by man's insignificance. This notion is dramatically represented in the previously discussed "A Dream Within a Dream." As the sand creeps through the narrator's hand, he weeps, "Oh God! can I not save/One from the pitiless wave?" Here the wave symbolizes the passage of time, the advance of which can never be halted. Herein lies the tragedy of man's existence.

The wave is also used in Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." In this highly romantic work, the speaker explains that he loved a "fair maiden" and that they loved with a perfect love in a "kingdom by the sea." While the girl is now dead, her tomb still is located by the "sounding sea." This would seem to be an appropriate resting place for the idealized maiden, for the sea represents permanence. By associating Annabel Lee with the ocean, the narrator is suggesting that she, or at least what she represents, is immortal. He is suggesting that she, like the sea, is timeless. Even though Poe's application of the wave image differs from that of the preceding poem, it should be noted that the image itself essentially carries the same meaning. It is a symbol of that which is everlasting, of that which shrinks the significance of the temporal world. Both the timepiece and the wave serve as reminders of man's impermanence. Consequently, their association with death is almost unavoidable. In many cases they foreshadow death or at least destruction.

In the story "Hop Frog" Poe uses a different type of

aural image to foreshadow doom. The tale relates to the injustices of a callous king and his seven privy counselors toward a young girl, Trippetta, and a deformed dwarf, Hop Frog, the court jester. When the king threw wine in the face of Trippetta, a "harsh and protracted grating sound" was heard (p. 348). However, the exact origin of the sound could not be distinguished. Later, when Hop Frog's revenge was about to be accomplished, the identical sound was heard. However, "on the present occasion, there could be no question as to whence the sound issued. It came from the fang-like teeth of the dwarf, who ground them and gnashed them as he foamed at the mouth, and glared, with an expression of maniacal rage, into the countenances of the king and his seven companions" (p. 351). Undoubtedly, it could be argued that Poe has included this "grating" just for the sake of effect or that it serves the purpose of a revenge tale by having the man "lick his chops," so to speak, in anticipation of what is to come. However, this image seems to accomplish something more than this. As are the people in "The Masque of the Red Death," the king and his seven aides are attempting to deny an aspect of life. They are willing to see that which they want to see and nothing more; they take delight in only that which is immediately pleasurable. While the people in "The Masque of the Red Death" refuse to recognize their own mortality, Hop Frog's victims refuse to recognize the sensitivities of others. In both cases they

are returned to reality by the aural image. The grinding of teeth in "Hop Frog" serves as an additional example of an image which points out man's limitations.

#### Images as Indicators of Mental Condition

At this point an interesting and significant observation should be made about Poe's use of sound images. It has previously been stated that Poe uses sound to help convey an idea central to his work. However, Poe just as skillfully uses the absence of sound in his prose and poetry. In fact, there are times when he totally arrests both sound and motion. As the raven of Poe's famous poem sits on the bust of Pallas, he speaks but one word and "not a feather then he fluttered." Furthermore, the narrator comments directly on the great silence within the chamber. In "The City in the Sea" Poe presents a scene of total motionlessness. In this mysterious city "no ripples curl," "No swellings tell that winds may be/Upon some far-off happier sea." With striking imagery Poe magnifies the deadness of the place, a place upon which heaven's light does not descend and where the turrets of the city blend with the shadows so "that all seems pendulous in air." It can also be noted that in much of Poe's fiction the sounds of the everyday world are not apparent. The characters of the tales seem to exist in a sort of vacuum which is penetrated only by the sounds which terrify. In "The Cask of Amontillado," for instance, the



only sounds which are evident other than the words of conversation are the pathetic coughing of Fortunato and the sickening jingling of the bells on his cap. In "Ligeia," one of Poe's finest works, sound images are practically non-existent. While Rowena supposedly is terrified by sounds and motions within the chamber, the narrator concludes that these are merely products of her fancy, that even these do not exist. He says that "she spoke sounds which she then heard, but which I could not hear--of motions which she then saw, but which I could not perceive" (p. 331). Later, as the body of Rowena lies in the chamber, the heavy silence is broken by a low sob, a sigh, and finally a gentle sob. These are the only sounds of which the narrator is aware, and although they are vague, they terrify him.

There are undoubtedly a number of reasons why Poe often chose to incorporate little or no aural imagery in his work. Richard Wilbur suggests that Poe was largely interested in destroying the concreteness of earthly things, that he intended to deprive the reader of the world he knows. Therefore, Wilbur argues, the author places an explicit stress on disappearance, silence, and oblivion. In fact, he places this stress on all ideas which suggest non-being.<sup>9</sup> This appears to be a workable argument, for it has continually

<sup>9</sup>Richard Wilbur, "Edgar Allan Poe," Major Writers of America, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), I, 381.

been demonstrated that Poe was primarily interested in the spiritual dimension of man. Consequently, while aural images may help to signify the spiritual dimension, they are nevertheless part of the physical world. Therefore, it is appropriate that they appear in limited numbers. Furthermore, if such works as "Ligeia" are interpreted as psychodramas, if much of what occurs in Poe's poetry and prose simply takes place within the mind of the character, then the need for aural imagery is reduced even more. Whatever the case, Poe obviously centers his work around an investigation of the human mind. Therefore, Poe's imagery must be investigated with regard to its psychological significance. It appears that Poe often limits or omits aural imagery in an effort to show the detachment of his narrators, to reveal the absence of the physical world in their lives. Those sounds which are used are directly relevant to the mental conditions of the narrators. Thus, sounds of the "normal world" simply do not exist in Poe's art merely for their own sake.

Undeniably, Poe's work is a concrete expression of the spiritual dimension of man. The narrators of Poe's work are enacting man's internal conflicts. Such things as man's battle with his conscience, his battle with his own emotions, and his quests for understanding and meaning are represented tangibly through the external conflicts of Poe's narrators. In this fashion Poe presents man as he struggles in the

direction of spiritual Unity.

Richard Wilbur insists that this argument should be taken one step further. He argues, in fact, that there are actually no physical realities in Poe's work. On the contrary, he states that all scenes and situations in Poe's work are no more than concrete representations of states of mind. The Poe narrator rejects the physical world and does so by slipping into the world of dreams. Consequently, the reader of a Poe tale is not just seeing the concrete representation of the spiritual dimension of man, but he is seeing the spiritual dimension of man as portrayed by a dream.<sup>10</sup>

Walter E. Bezanson indicates that the opening of The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym is an announcement to the reader that all to follow will be a dream. Essentially, his conclusion is based on two observations. First, the opening incident in which the Penguin strikes the Ariel represents an incredible demonstration of seamanship. After the two boys are run over by the larger vessel, the mate launches a very small boat, in the night, during a violent storm. In addition to these rather preposterous conditions for rescue, it is noted that the Penguin is still under way when the jolly boat is dispatched to Pym's aid. Furthermore, Pym finds himself in a highly unlikely situation prior to his

<sup>10</sup>Richard Wilbur, "The House of Poe," Anniversary Lectures (Washington, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 25.

salvation from the storm. He is affixed spread-eagled to the underside of the Penguin and "is beating violently against it with every movement of the hull" (p. 436). The plausibility of this situation must be questioned. What follows the near catastrophe is perhaps more curious than the incident itself; for merely five hours after this ferocious battle for life, Pym is eating breakfast and calmly remarking that he is pleased no one notices his "jaded appearance" (p. 438). Furthermore, as far as is known no one ever questioned the loss of the Ariel. The reason, Bezanson concludes, is that dreams are private; that the voyage and all its fantastic elements never occurred except in Gordon Pym's mind.<sup>11</sup>

Actually, the extent to which dreams operate in Poe's art is of no great consequence with regard to the underlying themes of his work. The attitudes portrayed are unaltered by the interpretation of the format. Nevertheless, the dream notion is useful because it suggests an interesting explanation for a great deal of Poe's imagery. If Wilbur's assertion is accepted, then the plot of the typical Poe work must be interpreted as the narrator passing through various stages of consciousness. Often the narrator begins his tale in a state of semi-consciousness and progresses into a deep sleep. If this argument is adopted, Poe's

<sup>11</sup>Bezanson, pp. 54-55.

images become positive indicators of this progression.

Carlson maintains that images serve to show the semi-conscious state in "Ulalume." The first stanza of this poem consists of a panel of images which paint a quite unrealistic scene. In a non-logical, impressionistic sequence Poe presents "ashen and sober" skies, leaves that are "crisped and sere," "the dank tarn of Auber," and "the ghoulish-woodland of Weir." As a result of the opening stanza's unordered form, the images seem almost to appear and disappear and in doing so underscore the dream-like state of mind of the persona.<sup>12</sup>

"The Fall of the House of Usher" also illustrates the relationship between imagery and consciousness. Essentially, Wilbur sees two elements in this story. First, there is the decayed, crumbled, and rotting house of Usher itself. Second, there is Roderick, the resident of the house, a man tormented by his sensitivity. The structure of the Usher mansion is the allegorical expression of the narrator's body; Roderick Usher is the allegorical expression of the narrator's spiritual self. If Roderick is seen as the representation of the mind on the verge of sleep or the representation of the mind in semi-consciousness, many of the images which are associated with him become meaningful. These

<sup>12</sup>Eric W. Carlson, "Symbol and Sense in Poe's 'Ulalume,'" American Literature, 35 (March, 1963), 27.

images are, in fact, indications of the hypnagogic state, "a condition of semi-consciousness in which the closed eye beholds a procession of vivid and constantly changing forms"<sup>13</sup>

If the narrator of this story is in a state of semi-consciousness characterized by shifting, abstract images, one would expect that Roderick Usher, as a symbol of the narrator's mind, would enact the hypnagogic state in a number of ways. Wilbur maintains this is the case:

For one thing, the narrator describes Roderick's behavior as inconsistent, and characterized by constant alternation: he is alternately vivacious and sullen; he is alternatively communicative and rapt; he speaks at one moment with "tremulous indecision," and at the next with the "energetic concision" of an excited opium-eater. His conduct resembles, in other words, that wavering between consciousness and subconsciousness which characterizes the hypnagogic state. The trembling of Roderick's body, and the floating of his silken hair, also bring to mind the instability and underwater quality of hypnagogic images. His improvisations on the guitar suggest hypnagogic experience in their rapidity, changeableness, and wild novelty. And as for Usher's paintings, which the narrator

<sup>13</sup>Wilbur, "The House of Poe," pp. 28-29.

describes as "pure abstractions," they are quite simply hypnagogic images.<sup>14</sup>

An inspection of Poe's writing uncovers a vast number of these wavering, unstable images. In "The Raven" the bereaved lover mentions an "uncertain rustling" of the curtains in his room. Later, he states that his soul lies "floating on the floor." In "The City in the Sea" a vague stir in the air causes all to shift slightly. In the poem "The Sleeper" the "bodiless airs" flit through the chamber of death and "wave the curtain canopy." A sort of ambiguity, suggestive of the hypnagogic state, is also present in "Fairyland":

DIM vales--and shadowy floods--  
 And cloudy-looking woods,  
 Whose forms we can't discover  
 For the tears that drip all over  
 Huge moons there wax and wane--  
 Again--again--again--  
 Every moment of the night--  
 Forever changing places--  
 And they put out the star-light  
 With the breath from their pale faces.

A description of a chamber in "Ligeia" states that "The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial

<sup>14</sup>Wilbur, "The House of Poe," p. 29.

introduction of a strong continual current of wild behind the draperies--giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole" (p. 330). Again, the shimmering curtain suggests the state of semi-consciousness or dreams. It is also significant to observe that the arabesque figures on the curtains possess a wavering quality in themselves. The narrator mentions that the figures "partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view" (p. 330). He explains that the true nature of the figures was not immediately discernible upon entering the room. Rather, the draperies had to be approached more closely in order to be comprehended. This fact, Robinson asserts, indicates that this entire experience has a dream origin.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the shifting, ambiguous quality of the figures suggests their very unreality. As Montresor and Fortunato make their way through the catacombs in "The Cask of Amontillado," the glowing flambeaux cause shadows to flicker on the walls, thus producing a constantly changing, wavering pattern characteristic of the hypnagogic state.

It is important to note that Poe's fascination with the hypnagogic state is in keeping with his total philosophy as set forth in Eureka. When the mind is engaged in dreams, it is totally liberated from the physical world. In fact, in this state the spiritual world beyond man may even be

<sup>15</sup>Robinson, p. 69.



touched upon. Dreams for Poe undoubtedly must be regarded as the spiritual quest toward Unity, a movement in the direction of truth. If this premise is accepted, Poe's narrators, engaged in dreams, obtain what perhaps might be termed divine insight.

### Light Images

The extent to which a person is involved in dreams can be related to the quality of the light images. Wilbur contends that the rooms of Poe's tales are never exposed to direct sunlight because the sun is a part of the waking world and the waking consciousness. He notes that when light does enter a Poe room through a window, that the window is tinted with a crimson or leaden hue. Thus, the light is transformed as it enters the room. It is no longer as it was in the natural physical world. In creating this effect, Poe is portraying that half-state of mind between dreams and reality. However, when Poe wishes to portray a deeper phase of dreaming, the lighting is artificial and the time is always night.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to the subject of lighting, one other rather magnificent image warrants mentioning. That is the chandelier that hangs from the ceilings of many of Poe's rooms. This fixture hangs from a high ceiling by a long

<sup>16</sup>Wilbur, "The House of Poe," pp. 34-35.

chain and usually this chain is made of gold. Wilbur argues that this image is also symbolic. Actually, the chain on the chandelier does not stop at the ceiling. Rather, it goes right up through the ceiling, through the roof, and up to heaven. It is, then, a significant image for Poe since it is a symbol of man's quest for understanding. Furthermore, it reemphasizes Poe's notion regarding the superiority of the spiritual. That is why, Wilbur maintains, that "the immaterial and angelic Ligeia makes her reappearance beneath the chandelier; and that is why Hop-Frog makes his departure for dreamland by climbing the chandelier-chain and vanishing through the skylight."<sup>17</sup>

A rather curious light image which often appears in Poe is what Oliver Evans calls "infernal illumination," supernatural light which emanates upward from regions beneath the earth.<sup>18</sup> Numerous examples of the phenomenon can be cited. In "The City in the Sea" the light from out the lurid sea/Streams up the turrets silently." As Pym sails toward the cataract at the conclusion of his narrative, he mentions that "from out the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose, and stole up along the bulwarks of the boat" (p. 553). In "The Pit and the Pendulum" the light

<sup>17</sup>Wilbur, "The House of Poe," p. 35.

<sup>18</sup>Oliver Evans, "Infernal Illumination in Poe," Modern Language Notes, 75 (April, 1960), 295.

enters the prison at the base of the walls. This in itself is a reversal. Furthermore, this situation becomes even more curious if the fact is considered that the prison is far beneath the earth. In addition, the adjectives wild and sulphurous, words used to describe the light, suggest an infernal source.<sup>19</sup> Near the climax of "The Fall of the House of Usher" an "unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation . . . hung about and enshrouded the mansion" (p. 283). The narrator ascertains that perhaps its origin is "in the rank miasma of the tarn" (p. 284). This situation is paralleled in the previously mentioned picture done by Roderick Usher himself. The painting which portrays a subterranean tunnel or rectangular vault, has no outlet nor any type of artificial form of illumination. Nevertheless, "a flood of intense rays rolled throughout and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor" (p. 279).

Evans sees these examples of "infernal illumination" as suggestions of evil. For instance, he argues that the painting done by Roderick Usher projects his own brilliant personality and that the personality, like the light, has a satanic origin.<sup>20</sup> Yet, if the subterranean source of light indicates an evil in Roderick Usher, Evans must be implying

<sup>19</sup>Evans, p. 295.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 297.

that Pym and the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" also possess some degree of evil in their character. This conclusion does not seem satisfactory, for there really is nothing satanic about any of these characters. They are thrust into terrible confrontations, and they are tormented; but, they in no way seem especially satanic. It seems more logical to conclude that Poe uses the light to suggest his notion about the wrongness of the physical world, to demonstrate the terror and mystery of life. To assume that Poe wishes his characters condemned for being associated with "infernal light" is to oversimplify Poe's statement.

#### Color Images and the Concept of Unity

As he does with images of sound and light, Poe uses images of color as a vehicle for characterizing man's spiritual dimension. Once again, his limited use of color imagery is related to the overall intent of his work. If this fact is accepted, if it is understood that the writer is dealing with the mind in search of understanding, then it is fairly clear that the use of colors is not highly relevant to Poe's purpose. Poe deals with setting only as it refers to a frame of mind or a state of consciousness. Consequently, the tormented narrators are usually associated with darkness. Images of black, the absence of color, are common. Enlightenment, or escape to the ideal, or escape to dreams should logically be accompanied by the appearance of

all colors or the combination of all colors, white. Therefore, the dominant color imagery in Poe seems to be a study in black and white.

In Poe's writing images of black are associated with death or at least with the suggestion of death. The ebony clock in "The Masque of the Red Death," the raven in the poem by the same name, and the black cat in the story by the same name illustrate this point neatly. In each case the black object or animal is directly related to an awareness of death. While this symbolism is certainly universal and quite obvious, it should not be curtly dismissed, however, for this notion of color can also be related back to the fundamental premise of Eureka. If the universe is viewed as being in a state of disunity, if the world is in a fallen state, and if man is searching for a form of spiritual unity, then it would be expected that the colors of Poe would represent this notion. Since black is the absence of color, it comes to represent this imperfect state in which the universe, the world, and man find themselves.

On the other hand, the attainment of some sort of unity or some sort of ideal seems to be represented by the presence of many colors or the combination of all colors, white. In "Eleanora," for instance, an ideal situation exists for the narrator. The narrator lives in a paradise, deeply in love with his cousin and his mother. There are no intruders; nature is totally benign. In fact, a condition

of total harmony exists. Significantly, this paradise is called the "Valley of the Many-Colored Grass." The unity of the spiritual state, then, is complemented by the unity of the physical state. If the grass were only one color, the subsequent condition would be imperfect, for it would be one step further away from the notion of "Oneness."

This combination-of-colors effect can also be found in some of the interiors of Poe's rooms. For example, the room described in "The Assignation" is quite eclectic in nature. While Poe does not go into a detailed color description, it could be assumed that the room's eclectic character would result in a variety of colors. If the content of this story is examined, this would seem a significant fact. The tale ends in this room with the suicide of the lover. By taking his life, he has united himself with his lover in death. They have, therefore, been drawn together; they are now one. It is consequently appropriate that the room in which this suicide is accomplished is characterized by the unity of color also. The colors themselves parallel the idea of coming together.

One final example illustrates Poe's use of black and white imagery quite graphically. In The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym the narrator journeys through a world of black on his supernatural voyage. The sea is exceptionally dark, the fauna and flora of this world are black, as are its granite and its soil. The natives of the area have black skin,

black hair, and even black teeth. As could be expected, the world of darkness is evil. There is, however, salvation from this wicked world. At the conclusion of the novel, Pym sails toward a large, mysterious white figure which apparently is going to embrace him and save him from the jaws of the cataract. Thus, Pym has acted out Poe's principal ambition. He has traversed a wicked world and ultimately been unified with the greater order of things. While the conclusion of this novel is vague, it appears that Pym is united with the white figure. In other words, "Oneness" has been achieved. It is suggested that this figure is white because it represents the unity Poe has been moving toward throughout his life.

#### Eye Images: The Tangible Human Spirit

If, as has been suggested, Poe is attempting to wed the physical with the spiritual, one would expect to find some recurring images which represent this union. The chandelier does this to a degree; however, the eye seems to be a more prominent image. In the eye Poe seems to find or at least seems to identify the essence of the human spirit. Basically, the eye seems to represent the human soul in physical form. References to eyes appear continually over and over in Poe's fiction. He seems to be fascinated with them; they are often the focus of his attention.

In "The Man of the Crowd" Poe has sketched the

pathetic portrait of an individual who must constantly seek the comfort of the masses, even though being in this position simultaneously terrifies him. One of the most meaningful observations which can be made in this work is that each time the old man attains the crowd, his eyes roll wildly in his head. The eyes must be viewed as indicative of his spiritual state, one in which he feels simultaneous fear and relief. The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" notes that Roderick Usher's eyes are "large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison" (p. 276). Apparently, Poe has intended to parallel the decaying situation of Roderick Usher with his now lustrous eye. The exact meaning of this parallel is difficult to establish. Perhaps Poe is indicating that Usher's eyes have taken on this glowing quality because he realizes the terrible magnitude of his plight. Usher realizes he is the final male in the family line. It is his responsibility, therefore, to perpetuate the family name. Yet, Roderick realizes that his only possibility for doing so lies in an incestuous relationship with his sister, Madeline. As a result of this predicament, a great psychological battle is being waged within himself. Perhaps the eyes serve again to reflect the inner mental state; the frenzied, wild mind of the tormented protagonist.

It is interesting to note that the eye is also a prominent image in several of Poe's revenge tales. In "The Black Cat," for instance, the narrator temporarily satisfies



his wrath by taking the eye of his pet cat. By destroying the eye of the animal, he in some way gains relief from that vague hatred which haunts him. A similar situation exists in "The Tell-Tale Heart." Here the tormentor is not an innocent animal but rather a guiltless old man. Again, a strong hatred is felt, and again the eye is the explicit object of that hatred. Finally, "The Cask of Amontillado" also involves a reference to eyes. While the image of the eye is not central to the story in this case, it is mentioned and is significant. As Montresor begins to lead Fortunato through the catacombs in accomplishing an elaborate scheme of physical and mental torture, Montresor notes that Fortunato looked into his eyes with "two filmy orbs" (p. 206). The image of the eye covered with film, the identical image of the eye of "The Tell-Tale Heart," seems to suggest something is hidden. There seems to be some truth about Fortunato which is not known.

The first conclusion which can be drawn from these tales of revenge is that in all three cases the murderer had no real or apparently just cause for his action. The black cat's only crime seems to be that he bestows love upon his master, the old man of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is guilty only of being good, and while Fortunato's sin is excessive pride, the pride of Montresor appears to be at least as great. Indeed, both men brag equally about their taste in fine wines. Thus, none of the murderers really seem to understand

their motives. The image of the eye is significant. Perhaps what torments all these individuals is some vague sense of guilt about themselves. Perhaps they feel an unidentifiable sense of sin, and they lash back at this feeling through murder. The eye, then, functions as a container of the spiritual truths about their own lives. In the eyes of others, they see truths which are often clouded ("filmed") and which they cannot totally understand or accept. They are frustrated by the inexplicable nature of their being and, therefore, kill others or take their eyes in an attempt to destroy this problem. In essence, then, all these characters engage in a type of symbolic suicide. This notion is reinforced by the previously discussed submergence images.

The image of the eye is most intriguing to Poe when he is dealing with the eyes of women. Indeed, it seems that Poe almost has a passion for the subject. Typically, the eyes of his female figures are large, bright, and full of expression, piercing, in fact. Once again, they are mysterious, seeming to defy understanding past a point. Eleonora has eyes brighter than all things. The woman of "The Assignation" has "large lustrous eyes" (p. 184). The eyes of the young Morella, are much like her mother's, but, the narrator comments, "they too often looked down into the depths of my soul with Morella's own intense and bewildering feeling" (p. 338). Finally, in "Ligeia" Poe speaks directly about the expression of the large eyes of his heroine. As

he does, he stops to reflect that the word "expression" is a nebulous and fascinating term, a term behind which "we entrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual" (p. 325).

It will be argued that Poe's longing to understand the "expression" of the female eye is simply another attempt at grasping the concept of Oneness. His attraction to the mysterious quality of the female is actually an attraction to the inexplicable nature of her beauty. In reality, it is the female beauty that Poe finds enigmatic. Moldenhauer states that when considered psychologically, "Beauty, like Unity, refers to attainment, however fleeting, of a state of perfect satisfaction."<sup>21</sup> Herein lies an important clue to understanding Poe's quest. In essence, Poe is attracted to the image of the eye because it is a symbol of women's beauty, beauty that he wants desperately to understand because of the perfection it represents.

D. H. Lawrence theorizes that the narrator of "Ligeia" is undone by this inordinate desire to understand. In seeking to comprehend the nature of Ligeia, he becomes a sort of "vampire," seeking to totally possess the soul of the woman. Thus, because he does not send out his soul to her, because their souls do not meet, he ultimately destroys her. The persona wishes only to analyze, to take, and in doing so he

<sup>21</sup> Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," PMLA, 83 (May, 1968), p. 287.

consumes her.<sup>22</sup>

To an extent, perhaps, Poe's difficulty is similar to Ligeia's husband. Poe's search for meaning is so analytical that he is rendered incapable of real love. He wishes so totally to possess that he becomes unable to give. In this manner, his attempt to understand the nature of Unity, has driven him to isolation and despair. This, it appears, is one of the great tragedies for Poe; that the spiritual seemingly must remain a mystery, that something he calls the "expression" of the eye can never be totally understood.

#### Mirror Images and the Spiritual Dimension

In a number of his works Poe's concern with the spiritual dimension of man is developed through images which function as mirrors, although not in the typical sense. These are images which reflect the physical world and, in doing so, seem to somehow alter it or make it more terrible. One cannot read "The Fall of the House of Usher" without being struck by the image of the tarn which surrounds the mansion. When the narrator peers into the tarn upon arriving at the house, he finds that the "remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows" cause a "shudder

<sup>22</sup>D. H. Lawrence, "Edgar Allan Poe," The Symbolic Meaning, ed. Armin Arnold (London: Centaur Press, 1962), pp. 120-24.

even more thrilling than that he experienced upon viewing the house directly" (p. 274). This is a significant point, for the real terror which the House of Usher contains is not a physical one. Rather, what is much more terrible is the plight of the Usher line and, specifically, the plight of Roderick. It is, therefore, what the house represents which is terrifying. Hence, it is not surprising that the narrator finds the representation of the mansion in the tarn more terrible than the mansion itself.

The image of the mirror also appears in "William Wilson" and serves to underscore the meaning of the tale. Here again it reflects the physical and thereby reveals the "reality" of the situation. After fatally wounding the William Wilson who has hounded him through life, the protagonist sees his own image "all pale and dabbled in blood" (p. 238) in a large mirror which has mysteriously appeared. As he dies, the antagonist announces that although he yields to death, he is not dying alone. William Wilson, the murderer, has killed himself in killing his antagonist, his conscience. It is difficult to draw neat conclusions about this tale because it is highly ambiguous. However, the function of the mirror seems quite clear. As it did in "The Fall of the House of Usher," it allows insight which exceeds the confines of physical reality. It reveals the true terror of the human dilemma.

In "The Oval Portrait" the painting of the young bride

functions as a corollary of the mirror image. As the portrait takes form, it not only reflects the physical image of the woman but also her spiritual essence. So totally, in fact, does it do this that it becomes the reality; it becomes the living being. As it takes its final form, therefore, the life of the bride is extinguished, for all her life is reflected in the painting. Poe again has presented his view of the world. As before, he depicts a world which really cannot be known directly. The tangible, physical world is shallow and superficial. Poe seeks what is on the other side of this world and uses the mirror to illustrate this spiritual dimension.

#### Poe's Constant Struggle for Meaning

Charles Sanford suggests that Poe "relinquished to the end of his life both the pain of loss and his dream of being restored to his childhood bliss."<sup>23</sup> Certainly, Poe's art demonstrates his overwhelming feeling of loss. His comments in Eureka evidence quite strongly that the universe and man's position in it are characterized by disorder. Consequently, much of Poe's work contains imagery which illustrates this belief. While the past is associated with positive images, the present is characterized by images which show the

<sup>23</sup>Charles L. Sanford, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Blight Upon the Landscape," American Quarterly, 20 (Spring, 1968), p. 55.

misdirection of the natural forces. Poe's art reveals man moving in a fragmented world where he is involved in a continuous quest for understanding. Man attempts to move beyond the physical limitations of existence in an effort to confront the meaning of life.

Typically, Poe's narrators are tortured by their own feelings of despair about their condition. The transient quality of life, suggested by the image of the timepiece or the image of the wave, haunts them. Yet, like Poe, they seem to be caught in a conflict between a simultaneous fear of death and a longing for a return to Unity. Thus, to a great extent, Poe's fiction and poetry is an expression of man's elemental fears, hopes, and quests for understanding. As a result, his work is saturated with images of shadows and darkness, images which relate to the fringes of life and the spiritual life beyond. What Poe seeks out of this darkness is the understanding of life, the truth characterized by the Oneness of all things.

Because Poe is caught up in an effort to understand the essence of life, various types of images indicative of this quest recur in his work. The dream image evidences his effort to move beyond the physical into the spiritual. Similarly, images of submergence represent Poe's attempt to directly confront and understand the significance of death. Poe's fascination with the eye image and the image of the mirror is also related to his attempt to determine the

meaning of life at its core.

Perhaps Poe's poem "To Helen," in itself an image of the searching soul, symbolizes Poe's struggle for meaning. In this poem, Helen performs a beneficent service for the persona:

HELEN, thy beauty is to me  
 Like those Nicean barks of yore,  
 That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,  
 The weary, wayworn wanderer bore  
 To his own native shore.  
 On desperate seas long wont to roam,  
 Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,  
 Thy Naiad airs have brought me home  
 To the glory that was Greece,  
 To the grandeur that was Rome.

Gargano suggests that Poe has re-interpreted the Helen myth in terms of his own artistic disposition and needs. The poet of this poem is a Ulyssean wanderer; however, he is capable, as the Homeric Ulysses was not, "of reaching Rome as well as Greece."<sup>24</sup> Helen serves as a unifying force in the poet's life. Through her the artist is able to find a spiritual home in a fragmented world. Like the narrator of the poem, Poe's life was also a continual quest for value, a continual search for Unity.

<sup>24</sup> James W. Gargano, "Poe's 'To Helen,'" Modern Language Notes, 75 (December 1960), pp. 652-53.



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