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Poe's Challenge to Sentimental Literature through Themes of Obsession, Paranoia, and Alienation

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by

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's works have withstood the test of time. Converse to the popular sentimental literature of the time, Poe's works offer a more intimate and psychological approach. It is through the inner dialogue of his speakers and narrators that Poe challenges the emotional appeal of sentimental literature. By looking at Poe's poetry and short stories, the common themes of obsession, paranoia, and alienation emerge. Through these themes, Poe's works serve as cautionary tales to the incomplete nature of sentimental literature towards the full human condition.

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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was one of the most notable authors of the nineteenth century. Although not immensely successful during his time, Poe's work has remained a crucial component of the canon of American literature. A major contributing factor to Poe's delayed, yet continued success, is his unique approach to writing. Through his writing, Poe brought forth the detective novel, science fiction, and stories of the macabre. Most notably, Poe addressed psychological elements in his works. Poe also acknowledged the hardships of the time. He cleverly offers a different approach to the culture through contrast to sentimental literature. Poe's challenge to sentimental literature is seen primarily through three major themes in his works: the obsession with the dead or dying woman, paranoia and madness, and loneliness and alienation.

Through this research, I have found that through his works, Poe actively challenges the popular sentimental literature that was a cultural norm for the time. Kelly Richardson states:

> In 1860, the writer of an article entitled "Sentimentalism" that appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* defined sentimentalism as 'either a disease of a moral nature, or a perversion of imagination; either the illusive confounded with the actual, or fancy taken in preference to fact; either an emotional self-deception, or a pretentious unrealism.' (170)

Whereas sentimental literature brings forth an emotional approach to literature, Poe focused on a more mental and psychological approach. The nineteenth century saw many hardships, such as wars and illnesses, and the literature of the time sought ways to cope with these hardships by creating an idealized world and future in the afterlife. Poe, on the other hand, stood out. While Poe's works also contain an emotional appeal, he takes on a more grippingly real and tragic approach by acknowledging disturbing themes instead of glossing them over. Poe does not offer

readers an opportunity to gloss over the trauma, but instead, his works show what happens to characters who try to gloss over their pain as sentimental literature did. For these characters, obsession, paranoia, and madness ensue.

In chapter 1, "Chapter 1: Poe's Challenge to Sentimental Culture via the Repression of Grief through the Obsession with the Dying Woman," I discuss how Poe uses the fixation on the death of a lover to challenge the positive spin of death popularly used in sentimental literature. In contrast, Poe does not afford his narrators reprieve after the death of a loved one. Many of Poe's works focus on death. While sentimental literature aimed to gloss over the excessive death experienced in the nineteenth century, Poe's works instead throw readers into every layer of pain and grief. Although many of Poe's works incorporate death in some shape or form, his poetry really stands out. Much of Poe's poetry fixates on the dead or dying woman. In this way, Poe was able to appeal to sentimental readers through the strong and emotional connections present in some of his works. But then, Poe has his speakers crash into reality after losing the loved one. The speakers are unable to cope with the loss, and eventually their lost love becomes the monomaniacal focus of their lives. The speakers are unable to move on as they become obsessed, and in some cases haunted, by the idea of those who left them behind. "The Raven," "Annabel Lee," and "Ulalume" are perfect examples of Poe employing this technique. In each poem, Poe has speakers suffering the loss of a loved one, but he does not allow them to overcome the loss through time. Instead, the speakers become obsessed with the missing presence in their lives and become haunted by what their life was previously. They are unable to function normally as their loss has come to occupy their lives. In this way Poe suggests that not moving on from loss is unhealthy.

In chapter 2, “Poe’s Focus on Paranoia as a Response to the Repression of Psychological Distress in Sentimental Literature ,” I discuss how Poe’s short stories feature mentally unstable narrators whose mental illness arises due to suppressed feelings. Poe brings the theme of paranoia and mania into his works. Although this theme shows up in many of his works, several of Poe’s short stories are great examples of how he applies this theme. The stories “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” all exhibit narrators experiencing madness. In each case, the paranoia of the character continues to build as the plot progresses. Confined by the expectations of society, these characters have no option but to go mad. Through “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” Poe has the narrators constantly proclaim their sanity; thus, further proving that the characters are actually insane. Poe uses the crumbling infrastructure of the house in “The Fall of the House of Usher” to mirror the mental state of the characters within the story. In many of Poe’s short stories, the narrators exhibit a crumbling sense of reality and sanity. By implementing characters with these traits, Poe sets his works apart from others. These stories offer a more intimate and realistic take on the human psyche and condition. Poe presents the story directly through the narrators and their inner dialogue, offering readers a close and intense perspective. The voices of narrators in sentimental pieces do not share this stylistic trait.

In chapter 3, “Poe’s Exploration of the Darkness of Loneliness and Alienation in Response to Sentimental Literature’s Optimism, “I discuss how the narrative’s perspective creates an individual and isolated world for the narrator. Through his flawed narrators, Poe makes the argument for the need for true human connection and interaction. The absence of such connections propels his narrators into a world of hardship and madness. Perhaps the theme of loneliness and isolation is most prominent in Poe’s works. This theme seems to serve as the

catalyst for all of the other themes within Poe's collective works. Due to the characters' extreme moments of loneliness and alienation from the cultural norm elements of paranoia arise. With this approach, Poe addresses some of the fundamental human needs that sentimental literature left behind. Without compassion, understanding, and true companionship, Poe's characters are rendered incapable of functioning within the confines of society. Poe paints this picture through his short stories "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Man of the Crowd," and "William Wilson." Their narrators have been completely isolated in their thoughts and interactions. The plots rely entirely on their observations. Through their eyes, the inconsistencies and impending madness become evident as the narrators fail, or are unable, to address and treat their problems. In contrast to sentimental literature, these stories serve as a cautionary tale to demonstrate the impact loneliness and isolation can have on an individual. Through the intimate telling of the story told only from the narrators' perspective, and their minimal interaction with other characters, Poe portrays narrators who become undone due to their isolation and alienation from others.

Undoubtedly, Poe's works, over time, have proven to be some of the most successful literary texts of the nineteenth century. Due to his stylistic choices and focus on unexplored subject matters, they are able to stand on their own. Although Poe's work is unique he does connect to some themes of sentimental literature and the nineteenth century, mainly through his recurrent focus on death. However, Poe also takes the opportunity to point out the flaws in sentimental literature and reveal more psychologically stimulating truths. Through Poe's poems and short stories these unique authorial traits, subjects, and goals become evident.

Chapter 1: Poe's Challenge to Sentimental Culture via the Repression of Grief through the Obsession with the Dying Woman

Undoubtedly, Edgar Allan Poe's centralized focus on obsession differentiates his works from the sentimental writers of his time. Notably, Poe's characters and speakers are motivated by one factor: their obsessions. In many of Poe's works, the death of a loved one serves as the turning point of the speaker as they sink into a full-blown obsession for what was lost. While obsession can be identified in a substantial amount of Poe's works, this central idea also serves as a focal point for many of Poe's poems. More specifically, the obsession with a beautiful woman (most often dead or dying) serves as the monomaniacal focus for the speaker. By looking at the poems "Annabel Lee," "The Raven," and "Ulalume," Poe's implementation of this obsession becomes apparent. As Poe demonstrates through his poetry, any neglect or failure to acknowledge such feelings will consume those left behind and drive them to madness. Poe uses his speakers who are obsessed with their lost loved ones to illustrate this idea.

By applying Poe's own theory in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" to his works, it becomes clear that the monomania present in Poe's work was deliberate. Poe states, "Beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul" (Leitch 646). By Poe's own volition, beauty creates the tone and feel for a poem and renders the effectiveness of the poem. Beauty excites the reader and touches their soul. When beauty is achieved, the rest of the poetic elements can follow. Poe's words demonstrate why so many of his works focus around a woman. The woman serves as a focal point for what Poe deems as beautiful. Poe argues that not only beauty is essential for the true essence of a poem, but he also argues that the dead or dying woman serves as the epitome of beauty .This argument serves as the catalyst for the central focus of obsession within Poe's works. Poe uses not only the idea of obsession, but

also the reoccurring theme of the beautiful, young dead or dying woman. This focus then becomes the obsession of the piece. Poe's "Annabel Lee" is a prime example of this tactic.

"Annabel Lee"

Poe's "Annabel Lee" focuses on the love that the speaker shared with Annabel Lee. Though Annabel Lee has passed on, the speaker of the poem is completely consumed with her and their love. The speaker's obsession with Annabel Lee is the driving force of the poem. Her beauty and the beauty of their love prohibits the speaker from being able to move on. In comparison, sentimental literature had the tendency to focus on the death of a loved one as sending them to a better place. Death enabled the individual to achieve the ultimate goal of reaching heaven. This perspective allowed for loved ones to accept the death and move on. Through "Annabel Lee" Poe flips this perspective and shows instead the disturbing reality of death. Poe shows that those left behind are simply left to mourn and grieve their loss. In reality, there is no remedy for the pain. Poe thus challenges the common perspective of the time by revealing the reality of the suppression of grief.

Poe starts the poem appealing to the sentimental culture by presenting an almost idyllic, fantastical beginning. The poem emulates the beginning and the rhythm of a childhood fairytale, or even the sea, but then, the rhythm starts to change. Poe's style brings readers in with a benign introduction to the poem, but goes on to challenge the very perspective of the sentimental culture. Like the changing tides of the sea as described in the poem, the meter becomes unpredictable as the speaker is thrown deeper and deeper into despair. The unpredictable meter represents the unstable mental state of the speaker. Poe's speaker is not able to accept the death of his beloved Annabel Lee and as such, the speaker is not able to cope with the idea that Annabel Lee is in a better place. Rather, the speaker contradicts sentimentalism by blaming the

heavens. The obsession of the love between the speaker and Annabel Lee is what drives the poem. The poem does not focus on how the speaker will reconnect with Annabel Lee. The poem fixates on their love and how Annabel Lee has been taken away from him.

Whereas most literature of the time offers the perspective of heaven as a healing entity, Poe presents heaven as the source of his pain. Throughout the poem, there is an abundance of references to angels, but it is their jealousy that leads to the death of Annabel Lee. Poe uses the "winged seraphs" to exude evil instead of good. In this presentation, the angels are jealous and steal Annabel Lee away from the speaker, proving to be a far cry from the common technique of using heaven as the ultimate goal for loved ones to be reunited after death. Poe furthers this idea by playing with the word "kingdom." Common Christian culture would refer to the kingdom of heaven as being the optimum end goal. Poe has his speaker focus on his and his beloved's "kingdom by the sea;" thus, promoting the idea that the speaker and Annabel Lee reached their "heaven" together on Earth. As proven by Poe's play on the word "kingdom," sentimentalism does not come into play, as there is no better place for the speaker than here and now on Earth. For the speaker, the saving grace of heaven does not actually exist. In this way, the poem not only centralizes around the idea of the speaker's love for Annabel Lee, but it also becomes hyper fixated on placing blame for their separation.

Throughout the poem, Poe continues to play with sentimental techniques while also bringing forth the intense obsession the speaker has with Annabel Lee. Without Annabel Lee, the speaker feels like he has nothing and is nothing; therefore, he must hold on to her memory and the love that they shared in order to be complete. This coincides with sentimental techniques of the time:

> In many of the classic men's texts of the era, the ultimate threat to individual existence is contamination of the self by social bonds' in the sentimental vision, the greatest threat is the tragedy of separation, of severed human ties: the death of a child, lost love, failed or disrupted family connections, distorted or unsympathetic community, or the loss of hope of reunion and/ or reconciliation in the hereafter. (Dobson 267)

As Dobson discusses, the idea of the afterlife was prominent during the nineteenth century. Anything to hinder being reunified with a loved one would be catastrophic. Poe acknowledges the views of the time period, but then directly challenges them. Clearly, while the idea of "Annabel Lee" originally presents itself as an element of sentimentalism, Poe takes it a step further by moving past sentimental technique. Poe does not allow the speaker the hope to reunite with Annabel Lee in the afterlife, but rather the speaker is so consumed by his grief and his loss that he cannot leave her side, even after she has died. The speaker's obsession leads his love to become all-encompassing and distortive to the beauty of their love. Poe uses the speaker's obsession and breaking point to then turn the effect and beauty of the poem to one of a gruesome and morbid image as the speaker literally lays down by Annabel Lee's grave. The speaker's obsession is so great that he cannot move on, he is willing to lay down his life to be with her.

"Annabel Lee" holds an abundance of significance as it was one of Poe's last published poems. In many ways the poem shows that Poe was not only challenging the sentimental culture and its aptitude to move past death, but he was shifting into a more personal writing approach as he himself was experiencing the feelings of the poem due to his own wife's death. Yet despite countering the sentimental approach, Poe does offer a slight glimmer of hope. Instead of being a product of the time, the poem offers the speaker the ability to transcend death as the love he and Annabel Lee share seems to be stronger than death:

> (Poe's) favorite theme, grieving for the death of a beautiful woman, had been the subject of "Lenore," "The Sleeper," "To One in Paradise," "The Raven" and "Ulalume," and recurred in "Annabel Lee." But in the last poem, as in the story "Eleonora," young love transcends death and survives in spiritual union. (Meyers 243)

Contrary to sentimental literature, it is not the idea of heaven that leads the speaker to be comforted, but rather, it is the idea that his love for her is too strong to be severed.

Poe's "Annabel Lee" lends itself to be the perfect example of how Poe was able to play off the sentimental literary techniques of his time. In the case of the poem, Poe uses sentimentalism to appeal to the masses, but then, Poe challenges the time's beliefs by presenting a more honest and truly grieving speaker. Through Poe's play on words and expression of obsession, the poem becomes much deeper and evokes a more realistic response to the death of the love one. Instead of allowing the idea of heaven to be a form of redemption and healing, Poe uses it to be the cause for the speaker's breaking point. For the speaker, heaven is not saving their love, it is trying to sever their love. The speaker's loss cannot be healed as he becomes all encompassed by his love ultimately allowing his obsession to overcome him as he lays himself down next to Annabel's grave. Poe's poem lends itself not as a tale of redemption, but instead as a tale of preoccupation and consequently, soul-crushing loss.

"The Raven"

Similarly, Poe's "The Raven" offers a critique on sentimental culture through the speaker's obsession with a dead woman. Considered to be Poe's most successful and well-known work, "The Raven" offers the tale of a speaker who is overcome by a grief that has become haunting. Poe even reflects on his own method of writing this poem with his essay "The

Philosophy of Composition." Through these means, the clear replication of the dying woman within Poe's works becomes apparent and is obviously intentionally made.

In looking at "The Raven" it is clear that many elements lead to one specific focus, the obsession with the woman. This is most defined through the reoccurring statement of the raven stating "Nevermore." Poe addresses the use of repetition in "The Philosophy of Composition":

> As commonly used, the *refrain*, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so vastly heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of *the application* of the *refrain* – the *refrain* itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried. (Leitch 646)

The implementation of the refrain in "The Raven" affords Poe the ability to offer his speaker the ability to fixate on Lenore, who has passed on. The raven's simple, monotone responses to the speaker replicate the sentimental perspective of death, but for the speaker, the raven's responses do not bring him comfort. The raven's replies only drive the speaker to madness. In addition, the idea of the refrain gives insight into Poe's works as the inclusion and obsession with the dead or dying woman serves as a refrain within his works as well.

Within "The Raven" there are many aspects that allow the reader to pick up on Poe's obsession with the dying woman. The bird itself serves as a symbol for an ill omen. It is an animalistic representation of death and dying. The bird being the focal point of the poem affords readers the ability to appreciate the repetition of the bird's message "Nevermore." As the poem continues, the speaker is consumed with the idea of seeing Lenore. The speaker repetitively

askes the raven about Lenore This enables the poem to once again become obsessive with the dying, or in this case, dead woman as she becomes the motivating force of the poem itself.

Where “The Raven” offers up the symbolic representation of the woman through the bird, it differs greatly from mourning pieces of the sentimental period. During the nineteenth century, people would turn to memorial objects, or mourning clothes to assist them through their grief:

> It is well known that many nineteenth-century individuals turned their bodies into sites serving to mourn their dead…What is perhaps less well known is that they also used artifacts from the body of the deceased to mourn and memorialize as well; most the common were locks of hair. These became a powerful means of representing the departed and, for many, a means of envisioning the deceased in (the) afterlife. (Bradford 26)

Although Poe practiced such acts in his personal life, he counteracts this idea of grieving by having the representation of mourning present with the sinister black bird. The incorporation of the bird allows for a verbal representation and constant reminder of what the speaker has lost, his Lenore. In addition, the raven does not help the speaker through his mourning, but rather it drives the speaker mad. The bird does not assist the speaker in moving it on; instead, it serves as a constant reminder of the grief of the loss of Lenore. Thus, the speaker is unable to think of anything else, and the death of the beautiful woman, and the bird, become the speaker’s obsessions that only intensify throughout the poem. Through this method, Poe challenges the sentimental position by establishing the growing pain and sorrow of the speaker.

Poe’s choice of refrain in “The Raven” is symbolic in and of itself. Contradictory to sentimentalism, the response of “Nevermore” presents readers with a negative duality of interpretation. The speaker, obsessed with the searching of Lenore, is overcome with finding

answers from the raven. This is seen through the varying entrances and climactic ending of the poem:

> The raven introduces "Nevermore" at the end of stanza eight; and thereafter "Nevermore" serves as a reply to the bereaved questioner, finally becoming emblematic of his subjective state. As the sign of his pessimistic melancholy it is an explanation of "nothing more." Only after the raven has become symbolic, after the full extent of the questioner's loss and the degree of his perversity and self- pity are apparent, do the questioner's isolation and self-limitation to "nothing more" become meaningful . (Caputi 174)

As Caputi shows, Poe uses the raven's response to drive the speaker mad. While the raven and its response reflect the speaker's loss of sanity, it also presents death's reality. The raven's replies offer the speaker no relief and ultimately, leave the speaker mad and even more disconnected from reality and Lenore. The speaker has now become nothing without his Lenore and is overwhelmed with the constant reminder of her that the raven gives. The refrain of "nevermore" promotes the anti-sentimental idea that Lenore will be present "nevermore." Thus, Poe comments on those left behind, specifically, those left behind by the beautiful woman they love. The speaker of "The Raven" is left behind by Lenore and instead of finding solace in being reunited in heaven as would be the sentimental perspective, he is driven mad by the memory of Lenore.

The rising mental break of "The Raven's" speaker is also represented through Poe's stylistic choices. While most of the poem is written in trochaic octameter, there is a clear shift in pacing present. The beginning of the poem is pretty rhythmic with just the refrain of the ending sound of "more" for each stanza. As the poem continues, however, the speaker begins to go mad

by the presence of the bird. Poe replicates this through his use of dashes in the poem. The speaker has realized the torment of his continuous memories of Lenore, and thus has begun a downward spiral. The fifteenth and sixteenth stanzas of the poem show the speaker's demise as he becomes angry with the bird. This is followed by the use of abrupt, excited punctuation in the eighteenth stanza. The presence of the bird has become one of pain and is no longer of interest to the speaker. Even Poe's reference to speech by the speaker has shifted. Originally, the speaker simply responds to the bird through "muttered" or "said," but by the end of the poem the speaker exclaims and "shrieked" in response. There is a clear shift in the writing to demonstrate the mental state of the speaker.

Poe's "The Raven" is making a clear retort to the sentimental literature of the nineteenth century. In a time when death was so prevalent, "The Raven" challenges the sentimental approach of a loved one going to a better place through death. Instead, death wreaks havoc on the speaker who is left behind. The raven becomes the symbolic representation of sentimental culture as it serves as a constant reminder to Lenore. The raven leaves the speaker trapped and unable to think of anything else. While "The Raven" illustrates Poe's idealized definition of beauty and the beauty of a dying woman within a poem, "The Raven" also illustrates the refrain and thus, the obsession of the reoccurring dying woman within Poe's works.

In addition to "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee," Poe's poem "Ulalume" presents a similar image of the beautiful, dead young woman. In the case of this poem, there is a formidable force bringing the speaker back to the tomb of his lost loved one. The speaker's mourning is not as obvious as in the previous two poems as the speaker is initially unaware of the destination of his somber walk. However, by taking a look into what the speaker thinks he observes, it is clear that

he too suffers from an obsession with what he has lost. Through this tactic, Poe establishes his similar message that the loss of a loved one never really leaves.

"Ulalume"

Similar to "Annabel Lee," "Ulalume" offers a familiar sound and rhythm. Initially, "Ulalume" presents an almost whimsical rhythm as the speaker begins his journey. Using iambs, anapests, and a mostly predictable rhyme scheme, Poe gives the poem a light, beginning. Poe starts the poem by focusing on imagery, but as the speaker continues to look around him, his sights are reminiscent of his Ulalume. Through "Ulalume" the speaker is actively trying to forget his loss. It is when the speaker finally realizes his end destination at Ulalume's tomb that the rhythm of the poem changes ever so slightly. Implementing his characteristic dashes, Poe shows the speaker's stark, overwhelmed realization in the poem's ninth stanza:

> And I cried: "It was surely October
> On this very night of last year,
> That I journeyed—I journeyed down here! –
> That I brought a dread burden down here—
> (Complete Tales 76)

The speaker does not find solace in the memory of his loved one, but rather he feels burdened with the memory of what was lost. Through the speaker's proclamation the tone of the poem changes as he is thrust back into the inner turmoil of his loss. Even though a year has passed, the pain of his loss has manifested itself to be present in everything he sees; thus, making his life centered around the obsession of his beloved. Once again, the poem enables Poe to poke holes in the belief system of the sentimental culture by instead focusing on the singular focus death presents for the speaker.

Contrary to “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven”, “Ulalume” does offer up different insight. In this poem, Poe has the speaker directly reference his psyche, thus establishing the psychological connection and impact of loss. In “Ulalume” Poe has even personified the Psyche enabling the speaker to talk with her. It is the Psyche who leads the speaker back to Ulalume’s grave. Even though the speaker is trying to repress his feelings and his memories of Ulalume it is the Psyche that prohibits him from doing so. By this means, Poe is able to correlate loss to having lasting and reoccurring grief. For the speaker, loss is not something that can be overcome, but rather, it is something that has the power to be present in everyday life. This constant pull between the Psyche and the speaker represents the speaker’s desire to move on, but also his inability to do so. Poe pointedly shows that the sentimental views seemingly gloss over the inner workings of an individual’s psyche. Grief is ongoing and needs to be worked through, not idealized with afterlife. Furthermore, Poe also uses “Ulalume” to connect the psyche with the speaker’s soul. The speaker even states, “with Psyche, my Soul,” thus equating the psyche and soul as one. In this way, Poe roots the soul in the psyche and prevents the soul from being lifted when the psyche is still centered and fixated on the loss of Ulalume. Poe makes a direct connection to “The Raven” here as he closes the “The Raven” with, “And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/ Shall be lifter—nevermore!” (Complete Tales 71). With these works, Poe directly challenges the sentimental view of lovers and their souls being reunited in heaven. Through these speakers, their souls are rooted and trapped in grief and their souls will never be able to be lifted and reunited with their loves.

Perhaps, “Ulalume” offers a greater insight to the mental realm of the speaker than is offered by “The Raven” and “Annabel Lee.” The simple self-aware reference to the psyche

affords readers the ability to literally read the inner thoughts of the speaker. Eric Carlson declares:

> In order for the reader to re-create imaginatively the reality of the speaker he must enter into the dramatic world of the narrator's mind and there participate in the symbolic drama which unfolds… Although couched in the past tense, the narrative is not an objective retelling of what is done and gone, but an experience of great emotional intensity relived in a dreamlike trance of feeling and realization. Because the experience described is essentially subconscious, its coherence is psychological rather than logical. (26)

Because of the intimate, subconscious presentation of the speaker within the poem, "Ulalume" is able to demonstrate the idea of reoccurring thoughts and memories of a lost one. This perception enables Poe to openly contradict the messages of sentimental literature. Contrary to sentimentalism, Poe gives the control to the speaker's psyche, not religious ideas. Poe squashes the idealism of a romanticized afterlife and instead replaces it with the surrealism of love on Earth. Poe's use of the speaker's psyche gives readers an up-close, personal telling of the speaker's loss and struggles of grief. The speaker is not simply remembering and retelling of his love for Ulalume, he is still in love with her and that everlasting love is ruining and running his life as he can no longer be with her.

Being that the speaker of "Ulalume" is basically presenting the findings of his own subconscious, the poem takes on a certain imaginative, dreamlike approach. The poem almost reads as circular meaning that all of the speaker's observations eventually focus back on messages from his subconscious. This stylistic choice mimics Poe's choice of the refrain of the obsession of the dead and dying woman. Similar to the responses of the raven in "The Raven,"

Poe circles back to presenting the dead woman as the focal point of the poem through the continual reemergence of the speaker's subconscious and the reminder of his loss of Ulalume.

Also alluding to Poe's common refrain of the beautiful, dead or dying woman is Poe's choice to have all of these speakers present the poem in a narrative tone. This writing style enables Poe to present a more intimate look into the psyche of the speakers. In turn, this allows Poe to directly contradict to the sentimental culture by establishing the flaws and mental consequences the death of a loved one can impart on the survivor. In each case presented, the speaker reaches a point of breakdown over their loss. Reprieve is not achieved by traditional sentimental ways, but rather ultimate disillusionment takes place. It is the obsession with the loved one that prevents the speakers from being able to move on; thus, the speakers challenge the very crux of sentimental mentality. While "Annabel Lee," "The Raven," and "Ulalume" are great examples of the obsession with dying women, many of Poe's other poems can also fit into this theme. Some of Poe's short stories also follow a similar focus. Through these means, it is clear that Poe makes a conscious effort to use the beautiful, dead woman as an obsession to challenge the idea of the sentimental literature that was popular in his time.

The way in which the woman is presented in these works also brings forth Poe's ideas of writing and how his ideas differed from the contemporaries of his time. Poe uses the death of a young, beautiful woman to pull in readers used to sentimental literature. While readers are informed of the woman's beauty, and also, usually of her innocence, they are given little of anything else. Floyd Stovall points out Poe's own obsession with using women in his works when he states, "Of the fifty-two poems unquestionably accredited to him (Poe), twenty-five, including all of his best productions except three or four, have to do with women" (197). Poe's own writing technique serves as a reoccurring obsessive topic as a means for making a

counterargument to the literary culture. However, Poe's reuse of this topic results in many of the topical women being one-dimensional and quite similar in presentation. Stovall argues:

> He is particularly fond of the woman with a "classic face" and "hyacinth hair"… Poe's women are either extremely innocent and unsophisticated…or else abnormally intellectual…They are all noble and good, and naturally very beautiful…Most remarkable of all (is) in their passionate and enduring love for his hero. (197)

In this way, Stovall points out that it is not only the women who play an obsessive reoccurrence in Poe's works, but it is also the way in which these women show love and devotion to the speaker that reappears within his works. Poe takes the idea of the beautiful woman a step further by creating very similar women characters. Stovall continues:

> In name as well as in character and appearance, Poe's women are akin. His names are usually unfamiliar and always beautiful, especially because of their musical quality. This quality he secured chiefly by the use of long vowels, liquids, and nasals…In practically every case, the name is appropriate to the character, and even adds materially to the effect which Poe was desirous of producing upon the reader's mind. This effect was usually that of sadness. (197)

Clearly, Poe's use of the obsession with women proves to be effective, as it is this technique that helps propel his counterargument to sentimentalism. Death was a part of everyday life during the nineteenth century, and through his works Poe challenges the public to respond not with sentimentalist beliefs, but rather with a real and raw response. Failure to do so might possibly lend readers to the same fate as Poe's obsessed speakers.

Edgar Allan Poe held differing views during his time in the nineteenth century. While many authors were exploring the realms of sentimental literature, Poe was aiming to bring a

more realistic, psychological approach to grief. By implementing the obsession with the dying or dead young, beautiful woman, Poe makes a statement on sentimental literature. Through "Annabel Lee," "The Raven," and "Ulalume" it becomes clear that experiencing true grief, as was not done in sentimental literature, results in obsession and the inability to move on in life as demonstrated by the speakers of these poems. It is through the mental breakdowns of these speakers that Poe offers the possible repercussions for not acknowledging the heartbreak that a devastating loss can create. For Poe, love was eternal and anything less than forever was detrimental and should be treated as such.

Chapter 2: Poe's Focus on Paranoia as a Response to the Repression of Psychological Distress in Sentimental Literature

Similar to the focus of his poetry, Edgar Allan Poe has a central theme running throughout many of his short stories. Through his intense narrators and characters, Poe reiterates his ideas of obsession. Converse to Poe's poetry, these characters are not obsessed over the death of a loved one, but rather their obsessions are a symptom of their acute state of paranoia. Through their paranoia, Poe's characters often commit heinous acts that result in their psyches unraveling even further. Poe uses these characters to demonstrate the fragility of the human mental condition. While sentimental literature was popular in Poe's time, Poe challenges such ideas by presenting characters with their inner thoughts and dialogue exposed; thus, presenting a purer depiction of the character, no matter the reality of their actual psychological state. Although sentimental literature addressed the struggles and emotions of the nineteenth century, the issues were glossed over. Traumatic events were redirected to portray a positive and uplifting message. An individual's untimely death would simply be written off as the individual journeying to "a better place." Poe does not present this perspective in his works. Instead, Poe offers the alternative view of the repercussion of the negative emotions and impact a loss can cause. By looking at Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tall-Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat" these ideas and stylistic authorial choices become evident.

During Poe's time of the nineteenth century, the study of psychology was starting to blossom. Not only were people taking notice of mental illnesses, but such illnesses were starting to be identified and labeled. Names were being given to the ailments that people were experiencing during this time period. Poe is able to refer to the budding science in his literary works; thus, offering a stark contrast to the sentimental approach embraced by his peers. When

focusing on paranoia, it becomes clear that Poe's interest in psychology serves as a catalyst for exploring such personas and the impacts of their psychological states within Poe's characters. This is especially true when looking at "The Fall of the House of Usher."

"The Fall of the House of Usher"

With the emerging psychological ideas of the time, Poe is afforded the opportunity to present more dynamic and variable characters. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" the demise of sanity is present through both Roderick Usher and the narrator of the story. In both cases, the monomaniacal focus on the house and its own progressive state of destruction serves as the breaking point for both characters. The status of the house serves as a direct parallel to the men and their mental state. Poe sets the dark, somber tone of the story by immediately setting readers into a place of uneasiness. Resembling Gothic literature, "The Fall of the House of Usher" brings forth the feeling of impending doom. Maria Antonia Lima states:

> Poe's literary creations have undoubtedly enabled us to perceive the mystery and terror of our restless souls, showing that the manifestation of horror in creativity should be understood as a response to a world desensitized to violence and human perversity, and art is not immune to such destructive effects. (22)

From this perspective, it is clear that Poe is trying to make connections between the characters of the story, the house that is destroying them, and potentially the worldly events of Poe's time as well.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" immediately presents a state of gloom and doom. There is no hope to be offered in the story. The story immediately presents the idea of darkness which in turn impacts the narrator. The story starts:

> During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country: and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. (Complete Tales 299)

In this way, Poe thrusts readers into the state of the scenery, the house, and the narrator. With the Gothic approach of darkness, everything takes on a sinister and symbolic approach. The narrator arrives on an autumn evening; thus, approaching a doomed house in darkness during a time of death. While a spring night might have offered hope to the narrator, Poe isolates the narrator in the autumn when things are beginning to leave and die off for the impending winter. In this way, Poe is able to foreshadow the fate of the narrator by simply establishing his trapped state through the time of year.

Similar to the Gothic style, Poe establishes the impact that the house will have on the narrator. The narrator states:

> I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. (Compete Tales 299)

In this way, the narrator is immediately impacted by the house. At once, the house places and traps the narrator into a state of gloom. Contrary to sentimental literature, Poe does not afford the narrator a place of relief, but rather, Poe confines the narrator within the reality of the situation Usher is in.

In addition to the initial setting of the tone of the story, Poe also fills "The Fall of the House of Usher" with symbolic references. The constant reference to the house being equated to the name Usher represents the duality of the character himself. Both the character and the house are falling apart. The house, with its given name, is personified and equated to human status with the reoccurring mention of the "vacant eye-like window" (Complete Tales 299). The house takes on a human-like quality as it not only reveals the truth of the inhabitants of the house, but also the truth that the narrator will find of himself when he enters it. The house is ultimately falling apart, much like the falling and failing mental stability of its inhabitants. This motif is followed throughout the story as the house continues to crumble. The falling house mirrors the falling of the narrator's psyche.

Similarly, Usher presents a crumbling existence. Like the house, it is clear that something is not right with him. Visually, he is not the typical representation of the head of the house. He appears to be wasting away. He has periods of vacant stares and silences, thus unnerving the narrator. However, when Usher starts to speak more freely and presents his growing paranoia, it mirrors the ever-deteriorating house as well. The condition of the house directly impacts Usher. Usher becomes fixated on voices and the damage that the house has caused him. Usher calls upon the narrator to help him during this time, but in many ways, he is searching for validation on the paranoia the house has caused him to experience. As a result, the house serves as the sole focus point for Usher's madness and everything that transpires is rooted in the house itself.

In addition to the house's crumbling appearance, the story presents the house as being full of restrictions. Although the house is quite vast, the story itself is confined primarily to one

area. Continuing with the Gothic theme, the house presents a dark and bleak future as even the narrator notices:

> Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all. (Complete Works 302)

In this way, through the narrator, Poe quickly establishes the off-putting ways of the house. Although the house is vast, little comfort or signs of life are present in it. Although there are elements of enjoyment, as seen through the musical instruments and books, it is clear that happiness is not prominent. These items present the possibility of what could be and what could have been for the house's inhabitants, but the setting prevents this from being the case. Poe presents the idea that the dreams there are ones that will never be achieved, and they will remain trapped within the confines of the house itself. In many ways, the revelation of the interior of the house is foreshadowing the destruction and deterioration that the characters, especially the narrator, will eventually experience mentally.

The character of Roderick Usher serves as the greatest indicator of paranoia throughout the story. On several occasions, the narrator refers to Usher as "the hypochondriac." It is because of Usher that the narrator is at the house in the first place. Convinced that his house is consumed by evil, it is Usher who brings forth all of the pain and future paranoia in the narrator.

Usher's growing paranoia with respect to his own house is observed and analyzed by the narrator. Bruce Olson argues:

> The narrator's language of technical analysis carefully exploits the tension between the desire to control the experience consciously and the mysterious, unanalyzable feelings represented by the Gothic. Early in the story the narrator sets down his assessment of this conflict. (557)

The narrator initially takes pity on Usher. As Olson argues, the narrator's language is presented more technically, serving almost as a scientific observation of the scene, but as the narrator spends more time in the house his own sanity is jeopardized. His language and thought process begins to mirror those of Usher's. It is not until the end of the story that the narrator finds himself conflicted about what is truly reality. The narrator's initial analysis of the house and of Usher is called into question as Usher's paranoia reaches an ultimate high, thus also imparting a slight paranoia within the narrator.

When looking at the character of Usher, it becomes clear that paranoia is what leads to his demise. The character is basically confined to the house that he believes is responsible for the ill-fate of his family. Although he had the presence of mind to ask for his friend (the narrator's) help, he is constantly checking to see if the narrator has fallen to the same paranoia that has befallen him. Usher's paranoia is further proven by the objects that he surrounds himself with; specifically, his reading materials. Usher does not enjoy the reading of light-hearted tales, but rather, when he is not expressing concern over his life's events, he likes to read of similar instances. Brett Zimmerman states:

> A list of the negative manifestations of excessive feelings would include an overactive imagination, superstitiousness, and unhealthy overindulgence in grief, loss of reason and

> judgment, and unhealthy passions. Those are precisely the traits that characterize Roderick Usher. Humans can become victims of their own feelings if they do not consciously work to keep emotions under control. (49)

Usher is not in control of his emotions. His choice of reading material only ignites his overactive imagination. He is obsessed with what has become of this family. He is so focused on his sister, Madeline, that the lines between reality and centralized notions of grief have merged. Ultimately, the time spent alone in the house has sent Usher into a heightened imaginative state, and this sends his mental state even further out of control and into full-blown paranoia.

Usher's mental state is mirrored perfectly through some of his reading materials, and in particular, the story of *Belphagor*, by Niccolo Machiavelli. First of all, both stories are centralized around characters with similar names: Roderick and Roderigo. In both stories, the names serve as an ironic twist. Typically, these names refer to " a great leader or ruler." Neither character exhibits these traits. In both stories, the characters are presented in ways that would enable them to become prominent and influential men, but they both fall short. It is as if the names alone foreshadow the shortcomings and hardships that the men will eventually face.

In *Belphagor*, Roderigo is presented as a man that is heavily influenced the women in his life. These women lead him into a world of trouble. Similarly, Usher is driven into dismay by his twin sister, Madeline. He feels haunted by her. While Usher's reading material reflects his state of mind, it also reflects his troubled familial relationship, including that with the family's dwelling. In Machiavelli's work, Roderigo is to tries to exorcise, or pretends to exorcise, various women, but in his actual life he has to succumb to them. He states:

> he submitted to her will; nor, indeed, would he have scrupled at doing much more, however difficult it might have been, could he have flattered himself with a hope of

> preserving the peace and comfort of his household, and of awaiting quietly the consummnation of his ruin…Even his own familiar devils, whom he had brought along with him, had already deserted him, choosing to return below rather than submit longer to the tyranny of his wife. (Machiavelli 18-19)

In the same way, Usher is struggling with good versus evil within his own mind. As Madeline continues to impact his sanity, Usher succumbs to her influence. Usher cares greatly for the story of *Belphagor* and feels a connection to it. The content of the literature reflects elements of his own life; thus, allowing Usher to merge his worlds of imagination and reality. Usher's obsession with the literary piece prevents him from seeing reality and he becomes paranoid with the impact of the house and his sister's presence.

While *Belphagor* ends with a simple realization of who has the power, Poe closes his story with Madeline having the ultimate power over Usher and Usher succumbing to her to exhibit the idea of reality mirroring fantasy. In Poe's story, the relationship between Madeline and Usher is convoluted and thus, ends in the characters dying together as the house crumbles around them. It is only when the house begins to fall that more evidence of their relationship becomes evident. The act of the characters dying together serves as a death for the house as well and ultimately, the death of the family and of the name as a whole.

Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" offers a warning as to what can happen when and individual becomes hyper fixated on one part of their life. Contrary to the sentimental literature of the time, Poe offers the focal point of the story, Roderick Usher, as a man wasting away due to his own mind. During the sentimental time period, people were dying due to disease, but Usher is deteriorating from his paranoia. His is not a death that will end in beauty. Instead, it is one that will end in paranoiac turmoil and anguish. It is not worldly events that have driven the

character to insanity, but rather, it is the character's own imagination and subsequent paranoia. Through the character's isolation, his mind takes over, thus leaving him unable to connect to the rest of society. Poe offers "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a counter tale to the beautiful and optimistic approach of sentimental literature.

" The Tell-Tale Heart"

"The Tell-Tale Heart" also portrays a speaker who is driven to madness by his own conscience. Most notable to Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is the narrator beginning the story by proclaiming his sanity. Kenneth Silverman agues, " What has been written within the self will not stay concealed either. 'The Tell-Tale Heart' begins with the narrator revealing his madness in the very attempt to deny it" (208). In this way, this simple fact that the narrator feels the need to establish psychological soundness proves his paranoia and the truth that madness has taken over. The narrator's constant need to prove his clear mental-state becomes the monomaniacal focus that ultimately leads to his demise. It is through the speaker's repetitive declarations of sanity that he eventually admits to his crime ironically revealing the narrator's paranoiac state and loss of reality.

The narrator's paranoid state is mirrored by the irrational and frantic language that he uses. In addition to his persistent declarations of sanity, the narrator also demonstrates his paranoia through his speaking manner. Contrary to the nearly melodic speech and tones of sentimental literature, Poe offers a narrator who is self-involved and opens himself to be heard through his stream of consciousness, even though it is clearly irrational. The narrator does not use even speech, especially when referring to his own sanity, but rather his speech becomes choppy and abrupt. His language is rushed through the use of exclamation points and hyphens;

thus, furthering the idea that the narrator's sense of reality has become undone. Poe uses this technique to start the story, as the narrator opens:

> True!—Nervous---Very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; 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. 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. (Complete Tales 498)

Through these opening lines, Poe not only establishes the mental fragility of the narrator, but he also addresses the need for the narrator to be heard. The narrator is not simply mad, but rather he is looking for societal understanding. Converse to popular narrators of the time, Poe offers a troubled narrator, acutely aware of how he will be perceived. Readers are not only shown the mental instability of the character, but they are also shown the narrator's struggle to be reacclimated within societal norms by his constant assurances of sanity.

Poe's narrator then strays from the typical narrator of sentimental literature. According to Joanne Dobson:

> The principal theme of the sentimental text is the desire for bonding, and it is affiliation on the plane of emotion, sympathy, nurturance, or similar moral or spiritual inclination for which sentimental writers and readers yearn. Violation, actual or threatened, of the affectional bond generates the primary tension in the sentimental text and leads to bleak, dispirited, anguished, sometimes outraged, representation of human loss, as well as to idealized portrayals of human connection or divine consolation. (267)

Through Dobson's definition of sentimental literature, it presents the idea that Poe's narrator aims to connect to readers by exhibiting some of these traits. This perspective proves that

although Poe aims to connect readers to sentimental elements, he also demonstrates the fault in the logic. Without true understanding from the peers or society, Poe's narrators become irrational and act in horrendous ways. The narrator from "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a perfect example of Poe using this technique. The narrator desperately wants to connect to anybody who will listen. He is repetitively trying to get someone to understand what happened, but in reality, his heinous act and psychological break prevent him from truly making that connection. Coinciding with this, Poe leaves the narrator unnamed, making him more approachable for readers. This tactic enables Poe to establish the idea that really the character could be anyone, and that any person might have the potential to suffer the mental fall that the narrator endures.

The narrator's desire to have his voice be heard and to have his "sanity" further understood is demonstrated by his confusion about his own mental state. This is shown by the narrator's obsession with the old man's eye. Even the narrator is perplexed by his aggravation with the man's eye, but eventually the idea of the old man's eye consumes him. He states:

> I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degree—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (Complete Tales 498)

In this way, Poe proves that the narrator is struggling to rationalize his decision. He is not motivated by greed or a typical, possible reason for murder, but rather, he is haunted by the old man's eye and the feeling that it gives him. While eyes are typically thought as being "the windows the soul," the narrator is only brought to his truth through the old man's eye. He does not find himself through his own reflection, but rather in what is presented through the old man's

eye that bothers him. It is through his obsession with the eye that the narrator reaches his breaking point and becomes his "true" mad self.

In relation to sentimental literature, Poe presents a story that challenges the idea of what is seen or not seen. The old man's eye serves as a representation of this idea. The eye is jarring and cloudy. Presumably, it is unable to see what is truly present. In many ways, sentimental literature follows a similar role. Sentimental literature offered readers a way to gloss over real-world problems, especially those from a psychological point of view. Sentimental literature made a point of not fully seeing the world as it was, but rather what it could be, to elicit a way of coping with the disturbing truths of life. Poe challenges this idea by playing with the idea of the eye in the story. While the narrator is confused by his discomfort with the old man's eye, he fixates on destroying it. It is only through the destruction of the harmless old man and his eye that the narrator is able to see what he can become. Ultimately, it is with that truth that the character becomes truly paranoid.

The old man's eye then serves as Poe's direct challenge to sentimental literature. Through the story, Poe shows that sentimental approach of simply clouding reality in hopes of a more optimistic future does not work. As seen with the narrator, it only causes more distress. Eventually, it can result in madness and lead to more hard times. The sentimental approach of simply moving on, Poe shows, does not always work; but rather, like the old man's eye, serves as a constant reminder. Not working through the feelings, can lead to suppression, confusion, and madness as the narrator clearly shows. Poe uses the eye to reveal reality to contrast sentimentalism.

"The Black Cat"

Similar to "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" addresses an irrational obsession with an eye. It also features a narrator who is driven to homicide due to his paranoia. In the case of this story, the cat is what drives the narrator into a state of paranoia and subsequently psychosis. It is through the narrator's relationship with and acceptance of the cat that the narrator's paranoia, and ultimately madness, is revealed.

Again, Poe plays with the idea of the eye. "The Black Cat" features a narrator who reaches a state of psychosis through the use of alcohol. This psychosis then leaves the sobered narrator in a constant state of paranoia. It is the alcohol that changes the narrator, but he proceeds to blame the cat for his change in personality. The cat, being something that he once loved and treasured, becomes the source of his annoyance. In his first attack on the cat, the narrator removes an eye. This resembles the narrator's inability to see the fault in his own ways. Poe points out this error in popular beliefs of the time. Similar to use of the eye in "The Tell-Tale Heart" the removal of the cat's eye serves as a direct challenge to sentimental literature. In this case, the narrator is constantly reminded of his fault by the cat's remaining eye. Being unprepared to cope with his guilt, as sentimental literature would gloss over, the narrator becomes mad and commits even more heinous acts. Without acknowledgement of one's actions, their lives potentially unravel.

In "The Black Cat" the cat's overall appearance plays a significant role in initiating the narrator's undoing. The narrator acknowledges this when he states:

> In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. (Complete Tales 531)

While the narrator does not show support for this notion, it is used as an element of foreshadowing the rise in paranoia that he experiences. This is also shown when the second cat starts to take on the physical markers of the first cat that the narrator has killed. This causes the narrator to be taken aback by the cat. He no longer wants anything to do with the cat. It is clear that the second cat represents another shift in the narrator's psyche as he comes to believe that he is being haunted by the cat.

Similar to "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator of "The Black Cat" is focused on proclaiming his sanity. However unlike "The Tell-Tale Heart" where this constant persistence leads to the narrator being discovered, the narrator of "The Black Cat" proclaims his sanity in response to his actions. In this case, the narrator cannot believe what he has done, but he feels his actions are justified; thus, demonstrating the paranoiac state that the narrator is actually in. He opens with:

> For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream. (Complete Tales 531)

The narrator acknowledges the extremity of the story, but he is also quick to establish that it was just a natural progression of events. To him, it should justify his actions. Although the narrator proclaims his innocence, he demonstrates his actual madness by not seeing fault in his ways. He realizes that he should not expect support, but yet he feels the need to tell his story. Similarly, Roberta Reeder states:

> Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" is a study in self-delusion, in which the narrator's mind acts in distorting prism, casting reality into forms which satisfy his self-image, his

> need for self-justification, and his desire to abrogate responsibility for his actions. James Gargano has analyzed the narrator's mind into good and evil components, thus interpreting the story as an exploration of the process of moral disintegration .(20)

In addition to being an exploration of good versus evil, "The Black Cat" serves as an exploration of sanity versus insanity. Through the narrator's attempt at self-justification, his paranoia and insanity become astoundingly clear. The narrator almost takes on a paranoid, narcissistic approach as he reveals the need for his story to be heard. In his mind, he is the only one that can truly reveal what happened, thus proclaiming the sanity of this actions. In reality, his need to have his story heard only further reveals the madness of the character.

Contrary to "The Tell-Tale Heart" the narrator is not driven mad by his guilt or his actions, but rather by the cat itself. The constant reemergence of the cat proves the narrator's insanity as he imagines the cat haunting him. Throughout the story, Poe uses the cat as a source of accountability; thus, encouraging the narrator's rise in paranoia. Every time the narrator drinks or commits some heinous act, the cat is there to remind him of his humanity. The cat itself represents the duality of narrator. Throughout the story, the narrator exhibits different personalities. This shift is most often seen through the character's drinking. It is in these moments that the cat typically appears, thus representing the other side of the narrator. This is most clearly seen through the ending of the story. The narrator alludes to this repetition when he states:

> During the former the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started hourly, from dreams of unmutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate Night-Mare that I no power to shake off—incumbent eternally on my *heart!* (Complete Tales 535).

In this way, Poe clearly demonstrates the rising paranoia within the narrator. Initially, with the first cat, he experienced agitation with the cat constantly following him around. Now, with the second cat, he is haunted. To him, the cat has started to disrupt his life. Although the cat is not behaving any differently from how a cat typically would, the narrator is convinced that the cat is evil. Through his perception of the cat, it becomes clear that the narrator has completely shifted and is in a state of paranoiac madness.

The fall from reality, and sanity, is mirrored through the narrator, not only through his actions, but also through his vernacular. Poe establishes this primarily through the narrator's reference to the cat(s). Initially, with the first cat, the narrator refers to the animal like a pet. He refers to the cat with love and affection. He even calls it a friend. Once the narrator starts to have his psychotic break his way of referring to the cat changes drastically. Convinced that the cat is haunting him, he proceeds to refer to the cat with negative and derogatory terms such as "beast," "detested creature," "crafty animal," and even "monster." These terms match the changing psyche of the narrator as he flips back and forth between who he was and who he has become. Samantha Peyerl states:

> Unbeknownst to the narrator, his skepticism towards this new cat is a side effect of guilt. He cannot move past the murder of Pluto, which hinders him from forging a relationship with this new creature. Furthermore, what is interesting about the narrator's interaction with this new cat is that, aside from adopting him into his home, he never provides a name for him. Instead, he refers to the cat as "the creature." (24)

Thus, it becomes clear that the narrator has suffered some sort of break simply by looking at how his interaction with the cats has changed. Ultimately, the negative connotations of the cat match the demise of the character's sanity. In this way, Poe challenges sentimentalism again. By

glossing over the death of Pluto, the narrator is not able to really develop new relationships. Due to his failure to address the issues that caused the death of the first cat, the narrator's mental stability unravels even further. Handling the situation through sentimental beliefs did not enable the narrator to live a better life, but ultimately, it led him to ruin his life.

Edgar Allan Poe clearly brings forth psychological elements through his works. In many cases, the failure of societal beliefs and elements, as often found in sentimental culture, drive the narrators of Poe's short stories into madness. Due to suppression, in accordance to sentimental literature, Poe's characters are not able to actually find reprieve. They are not able to simply move on. Instead, Poe's characters are haunted by the duality of their personalities and the emergence of their paranoias. It is through the exploration of these characters and their paranoias that Poe establishes his critique on sentimental culture. It is only when the inner voices of the narrators are not heard by others that they are driven into their horrendous acts and then haunted by them. When these narrators are held as prisoners in their own minds, they have no other release, but to do the unthinkable; thus, thrusting them into absolute madness.

Chapter 3: Poe's Exploration of the Darkness of Loneliness and Alienation in Response to Sentimental Literature's Optimism

Without question, Edgar Allan Poe's works bring forth ideas of obsession and paranoia, but most of his works also reflect on the impact of loneliness and alienation. Poe's introspective narrators and speakers present a heightened sense of self-awareness. Through this process, Poe is able to offer more reflective and dynamic narratives, thus separating his works from the popular techniques employed during the nineteenth century. In turn, Poe's stylistic approach allows for a rawer and at times, more realistic, response to life and its tragedies. While writers of sentimental literature aimed to gloss over the struggles with death and illness of the time, Poe brings forth a shattering awareness of the true response and repercussions of such events.

In the case of Poe's works, it is the reflective nature of the characters that enables them to explore their full mentality. Converse to sentimental literature, Poe offers tales of individuals who have to find their way through their loneliness and alienation. The narrators and their inabilities to handle their grief and loneliness often result in their undoing. By these means, it is clear that Poe is contradicting sentimental literature. In Poe's works loneliness only leads to hardship, and sometimes, death. Loneliness is not something that can be glossed over as with sentimental literature. Through his flawed characters, Poe demonstrates the need for human connection, communication, and understanding. While Poe addresses the impact that arises when these needs go unmet, sentimental literature presents a nearly simplistic, idealistic presentation of these needs. Poe's stance on loneliness and alienation as a response to sentimental literature can be seen primarily through "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Man of the Crowd," and "William Wilson."

“ The Pit and the Pendulum”

Poe immediately plunges readers into the idea of isolation through the narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum.” “ The Pit and the Pendulum” presents the tale of a man imprisoned during the Spanish Inquisition. Aware of his sentence, but not of his punishment, the narrator is left to ponder what horrible consequences await him. Unable to handle the not-knowing, the narrator is constantly pondering which decision is better: death or punishment. Ultimately, the narrator continues to go on, but at personal loss of sanity. The entire story is presented only as the narrator sees it. Because the narrator has been isolated from the general public, his thoughts and actions are the sole motivation for the plot of the story. The narrator is not given the possibility of interacting with other characters. Readers are forced to view the story as the narrator sees it. Poe affords no interpretation from other perspectives, but rather he uses the narrator’s internal dialogue to show his inconsistent mentality. Ultimately, the isolation causes the narrator to become mentally unstable, and readers, along with the narrator, are forced into trying to muddle through what is real and what is part of the narrator’s psychological haze. Poe achieves this by beginning the story with uncertain origins. The narrator’s recollection of events comes in hazy pieces and readers are forced to mirror the uncertainty of the unreliable narrator. Jeanne M. Malloy states:

> By beginning the tale with the narrator’s trial and death sentence and by couching these events in apocalyptic imagery, Poe heralds the narrator’s, and hence the reader’s entrance into a nightmare world of punishment, dissolution, and death, an announcement amply fulfilled by the violence, pain, and horror experienced by the narrator in his prison cell. (82-83)

In this way, Poe is able to establish a disconnect between the story's narrator and his peers. Interestingly, Poe separates the narrator further through his past. Although the story forces readers to view all events from the narrator's view, Poe does not encourage a connection with the narrator. Due to his unknown criminal past, the narrator does not present widely recognized characteristics that readers can identify with. Instead, Poe forces the narrator to stand completely on his own.

Poe's tactic of isolating his narrator is reminiscent of the nineteenth century. Due to extreme loss during the nineteenth century, sentimental literature aimed to be a device to overcome, to gloss over, to move on. The individual unable to achieve such a recovery was left to their own devices. Similarly, Poe's narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" is separated from society, presumably due to his own actions that sentenced him to the pit. As the pendulum continues to swing, the narrator is severed more and more from his time and from society.

Poe presents this ideology further through the opening quote of the story. The quatrain, written in Latin, presents the idea that the narrator may not be in the wrong. The lines translate to:

> Here the wicked mob, unappeased, long cherished a hatred of innocent blood. Now that the fatherland is saved and the cave of death demolished, where grim death has been, life and health appear.

Although the narrator does not aim to prove his innocence, he embraces his fate. Similar to sentimental literature, where the idea is to overcome and prosper after a death, the phrase aims to do away with evil in efforts to bring forth good health. Through "The Pit and the Pendulum" Poe comments on the need to address the issues and hardships, not do away or disregard them. When looking at the entirety of the story, the narrator is secluded and preyed upon by his

torturers. This treatment directly impacts the narrator as he begins to question his sanity and the possibilities of his sentence plunge him into madness. At times, the narrator is even acutely aware of his madness. He states, "After this I call to mind flatness and dampness; and then all is *madness*—the madness of a memory which busies itself among forbidden things" (Complete Works 444). In previously mentioned works, the characters have proven their madness by constantly declaring their sanity. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" the narrator admits to having moments of madness, thus demonstrating the impact the alienation is having on him. His madness is not so much a part of him, but rather it is a product of the situational circumstances that he has been sentenced to.

Poe also makes a direct connection to sentimental literature through his exploration of the character's consciousness in the beginning of the story. The narrator makes references to being lost and confused. He is not quite sure where he is and where he stands in life. His observations are fragmented and incomplete. The narrator's inconsistencies within his current predicament mirror the inconsistencies sentimental literature presents. Aimed to be a solution through hard times, Poe argues that sentimental literature offers an incomplete and fragmented approach to healing. Sentimental literature simply covered up and trapped people in their feelings and situations as they were unable to fully heal. Similarly, the narrator is literally trapped in his situation. The narrator is offered a brief moment when he sees candles. He states:

> And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first, they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white and slender angels who would save me; but then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fiber in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless specters, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no

> help. And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. (Complete Tales 443)

Clearly, the narrator refers to sentimental beliefs by anticipating sweet rest in the grave. Sentimental literature served as a sign of hope, a light in darkness, but the light here falls flat. The narrator's hope has dissipated and, any chance for surviving is abandoned. Instead, he begins to see happiness as being in a grave. Allan Emery states:

> As other critics have noted, the candles are likely an allusion (by way of the seven lampstands and seven flaming torches mentioned in Revelation 1 and 4) to the Christian idea of resurrection. […] However, in the narrator's loss of hope, Poe appears to be dismissing the possibility of Christian resurrection and suggesting that the narrator is bound not for heaven but simply for death. Though the "thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave" briefly charms the narrator's fancy, that thought vanishes as he is plunged into "the blackness of darkness." (32)

Clearly, Poe is dismissing the sentimental mentality of people dying and "going to a better place." Poe dismisses this ideology by having the narrator simply realize the nothingness beyond death.

Poe plays with idea of nothingness throughout the story as well. There are several times when the narrator, unable to fully cope with his situation, reduces himself to nothingness. The narrator is alone and has no one, therefore he believes himself to be nothing. The narrator's perception of being nothing alludes to the impact of his alienation from others. His isolation causes him to feel unattached, and that seclusion is what frightens the narrator most. He proclaims:

> It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be *nothing* to see. At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me. The atmosphere was intolerably close. (Complete Tales 445)

As seen through by narrator, it is not so much the sentence that bothers him. Instead, what haunts him the most is being left behind, being alone, being left in the absolute darkness of nothingness.

The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" offers the perspective of an individual sitting aside from views presented in sentimental literature. This ideology is replicated through the narrator's inability to reestablish his whereabouts and the condition he is in. In the beginning of the story, he fluctuates in his ability to be really coherent. He has trouble identifying what is and what is not. Although sentimental literature aimed to offer a positive view and the idea of moving on, Poe suggests this perspective is flawed. The narrator realizes his narrow and grim future thus, offering criticism to the limited perception offered through sentimental literature.

Poe also uses the setting of the story to establish the disconnect between sentimental literature and reality. Throughout the story, the narrator describes the space as enclosing. There is the constant threat of darkness and of falling into the pit. The character is hyperaware of his surrounding and feels the rigidity of being confined in a small and unknown place. In many ways, the darkness of being in this place is what drives the narrator into anxiety-ridden madness. The place is described in sharp angles and dimensions, resembling the constraints of society during the nineteenth century. Alexander Hammond states:

> The text embeds its puzzle in the narrator's response to the differences between his inferences about the dimensions and shape of a torture chamber that he paces off in the dark and the much smaller, square vision of that chamber, lighted by a "wild, sulphurous lustre," into which he next awakes… the narrator mistakenly attributes the differences to confusion that led him to double measure the size and misinterpret the angles of the chamber while pacing in the dark…The Poe who enjoyed tricking readers would be proud, because the text itself features data that demonstrate the narrator's explanation is geometrically impossible. (5)

Through Poe's specific imagery establishing the setting, he makes observations on the culture of the nineteenth- century. Poe criticizes the very traits and mentality of the time. The impossibility of the geometry presented as the confines of the pit resemble the rigid restraints that sentimental literature enforced on those who did not fit. The harsh dynamics of the pit replicated the expectations of a sentimental society. The swinging pendulum furthers this idea by mirroring the breach between sentimental literature and Poe's take on a realistic response to the hardships of the time period. The pendulum, exuding the element of time, brings forth the idea that sentimentalism does not afford enough time for true healing.

Although "The Pit and the Pendulum" features a helping hand at the very end of the story, it comes at a cost. The narrator, a once confident and competent individual, , has been reduced to an erratic and desperate man. For Poe, the narrator serves as a direct connection to Poe's own life, as he was unwilling to conform to common nineteenth- century beliefs. Often, this left Poe open to severe criticism. Similarly, the reason for the narrator's persecution is not entirely clear, but the man's cunning attempt at survival is met with harsher punishment and torture. The mind games and isolation have driven him to no longer be himself. What little hope

of light that was once presented has been ripped away. The temporary reprieve of being saved is left with a still unknown future. This ending serves as a direct jab at sentimental literature. Although sentimental literature could present some reprieve for those grieving, Poe points out that it can come with a cost and it can be temporary. The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is no longer the man that he once was, and although he is temporarily saved, he is still broken.

" The Man of the Crowd"

Converse to "The Pit and the Pendulum," Poe uses "The Man of the Crowd" to show a different form and impact of loneliness. Although the story centers on a narrator experiencing extreme alienation, he is more removed than the intense, introspective narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum." The narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" is vague. Everything about the narrator is vague. His personality, his background, and even the illness he is recovering from, are all minimal in detail and are simply presented for readers. Similar to "The Pit and the Pendulum," the narrator and his condition and situation are rather vague. Poe does not afford readers the ability to connect to the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" himself, but rather to his fear of becoming obsolete and his need to observe others in an effort to connect. The narrator is not within the group, he is a separate outsider, looking in on the rest of society.

Again, Poe begins the story with a quote. The phrase directly connects to the theme of loneliness as it translates to "such a great misfortune, not to be able to be alone." When looking at "The Man of the Crowd," Poe's use of the quote functions as a form of irony. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock states:

> The paradox here is, of course, that the experience of solitude can only be appreciated as solitude by comparison with its opposite. To recognize oneself as alone is consciously to foreground the absence of others. One is thus never alone when one feels oneself to be

> most alone—the experience of loneliness invokes the trace of the absent other. Indeed, in that same moment of loneliness, when one feels oneself turning inward and becoming conscious of oneself in one's aloneness, this inwardness in fact turns outward, touches on an internal void that is constituted from without. The inward turn opens one to the outside, to absence, to otherness. (50)

Basically, the narrator is not fully aware of his loneliness until he is observant of the crowd, but not within the crowd. Ultimately, the man does not fit in with those around him, but he has no choice but to be alone. The narrator's observations do not enable him to connect, but rather they force him to remain separate as his focus on observation begins to be his own obsession. While the narrator is descriptive in his observations, the narrator himself remains an absolute mystery. Ray Mazurek states:

> "The Man of the Crowd" is not merely ambiguous: it is about ambiguity, about the sudden juxtapositions (or doubling) that allow one to see things afresh, and about the apparent arbitrariness or perceived relationships, which often seem, like the structures of a Poe tale, to be elaborate constructions, elaborate games. (25)

In this way, Poe uses the ambiguity of the narrator to connect to readers, but to also separate him from the other characters presented in the story.

Also notable are the narrator's initial readings of those who pass by him. Without actually knowing or interacting with anyone, the narrator observes the division of people due to society's perception of a class system. Through the narrator's commentary, he also comes to a realization about the people. He states, "—Very often, in company with sharpers, I observed an order of men somewhat different in habits, but still birds of a kindred feather" (Complete Tales

359). Although the narrator himself is separated from the crowd, he observes the differences of all members of society, but he also points out an underlying similarity.

The narrator has an overwhelming need to figure out the stories of the people within the crowd. Contrary to sentimental literature, which focuses on glossing over the suffering and dying, the narrator observes people of all backgrounds. Poe, through the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd," demonstrates the negative reality of the isolated narrator as he becomes obsessed with his observations, especially in pursuit of the old man. The narrator proclaims:

> With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age)—a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression. (Complete Tales 360)

Even though the narrator does not know the old man, his intrigue has been set. In pursuit of some sort of connection, the narrator is compelled to observe the man further; thus, setting forth his abandoning of the general public and instead encouraging a single-focused, stalking journey.

The narrator's fixation on the old man only intensifies as the narrator decides to follow the old man. He states, "Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him" (Complete Tales 360). The old man becomes the subject of the narrator's pursuit. Due to his alienation from everyone, the narrator cannot help but be intrigued by the old man and the possibility of better understanding him. In desperation to belong, the narrator is literally trying to force a connection with anyone. The narrator's alienation has left him feeling so alone, that even the observation of others has given him the slightest feeling of belonging. It has enabled him to become a part of the crowd.

Ultimately, the narrator's continued pursuit of the old man results in a monomaniacal fixation on the old man. The narrator's loneliness has caused him to create a one-sided relationship with the man of his obsession. Poe's narrator spends the entire night desperately trying to follow the old man. The old man, on the other hand, tries to flee the situation. Monika M. Elbert explains:

> Just as the reader discovers nothing about the narrator's background, the narrator discovers nothing about the man of the crowd, whom he had first sized up as being extraordinary. In his scrutiny of the old man, he intuits the conflicting emotions which belong to every man…The narrator projects his own feelings and hence the universal feelings onto this one 'specimen of man'…But his search for the other man's history, or his own, for that matter, is futile, as the narrator ends on a note of supreme despair. (21)

The narrator is not only looking for more information on the old man, but for his own life as well. The narrator feels lost in who he is and he has projected hope that by learning more about the old man, he will be able learn more about his own identity. But he is not successful in either respect.

Due to the narrator's isolation, he has no choice but to focus on the people he sees around him. Unable to obtain or sustain any form of connection, the narrator fixates on the old man. Basically, the narrator is unable to function as an individual, but his inexperience in expressing himself, his thoughts, and beliefs prevent him from addressing and connecting from others in the crowd. These character traits connect to the suppression of thoughts and feelings that sentimental literature quickly passed over. The narrator's refusal to simply reach out and talk to the old man is unlike sentimental literature as he only aims to gather understanding from afar and not by connecting with others. The narrator's inability to connect with others is what leads him

to flail throughout the city following the man and ultimately, the narrator is left in a worse condition than he was when he started. The narrator is unaware of how his perceptions and lack of connections are confining his view and preventing him from making connections of his own. Ultimately, through the narrator's eyes, it is clear that loneliness leads to obsession and thus, unlike sentimental endings, everyone is left alone.

"William Wilson"

While Poe brings forth the themes of loneliness and alienation in "The Man of the Crowd," his short story "William Wilson" also follows these themes. It focuses more conclusively on the theme of alienation. In particular, Poe uses alienation as a catalyst for eventual psychosis. Through the narrator's refusal to face his problems, a double identity emerges and eventually leads to the narrator's undoing. Basically, by not facing his demons a darker future emerges for the narrator. Poe's presentation of "William Wilson" challenges the very essence of sentimental culture. On one hand, the narrator takes on the Wilson persona to escape and gloss over his past, but on the other hand the constant need to escape and reinvent himself is what ultimately leads to the narrator killing himself.

The story of "William Wilson" almost serves as a haunting or a psychological thriller. Poe begins the story with a quote from Chamberlain stating, "What say of it? what say CONSCIENCE grim, That specter in my path?" (Complete Tales 314). This quote immediately sets the tone for the story. The narrator finds himself haunted by the ghost of his past, representing his own conscience. His trouble first begins at school. He also foreshadows the story by acknowledging a darkness inside himself, stating:

> Weakminded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me. Some feeble and ill-

> directed efforts resulted in complete failure on their part, and, of course, in total triumph on mine. Thenceforward my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions. (Complete Tales 315)

The narrator establishes not only the duality of his character, but also his separation from others. According to the narrator, he is able to handle and take care of himself at a young age. However, this quality sets the narrator apart from both his family and his peers.

The narrator's solitude leads to a path of isolation as he continues to grow. This impending feeling of loneliness is mirrored in the language Poe uses. Initially, when talking about his time at school, the narrator makes mention of his schoolmates. He also makes references from a plural "we" perspective. Later, as the narrator continues to flee from his problems, his alienation from others becomes more prominent. Gone are the references to group settings, as he presents himself as an isolated "I" or "my." The only exception is a challenge between the "he" of his double and the narrator. The narrator becomes trapped in his own mind and discomfort with his double. Leonard W. Engel writes:

> As the narrator draws closer to recognizing his true identity at the conclusion of the tale, Poe's enclosures subtly illuminate Wilson's isolation from the rest of the world. In addition, they gradually bring his two selves together until the climactic scene when his physical self, locked within the chamber containing what the narrator at first believes to be a large mirror, takes its final revenge. (92)

Engel points out the very issue that "William Wilson" presents. As the narrator is unable to address his double, his world of isolation continues to get smaller and smaller until his double completely overtakes his life and he has no choice but to confront his own duality. In this way,

the story contrasts sentimental literature. Poe argues that the inability to fully acknowledge feelings and pain leads to a duality of self, where what is repressed becomes another version of yourself that can haunt you. Eventually, that duality will have be confronted, but at what cost? In the case of "William Wilson" the cost is total isolation, and ultimately, death.

In the story, Poe also addresses the concept of time. The narrator's inability to confront his situation results in paranoia as he moves from place to place to avoid his double. Because of this, years pass, but the narrator does not overcome the situation. He states, "Years flew, while I experienced no relief" (Complete Tales 327). In fact, the constant need to relocate himself is driving the narrator mad. He has lost all control of his life, and ultimately of his identity as he sees it. He states:

> From his inscrutable tyranny did I at length flee, panic-stricken, as from a pestilence; and to the very ends of the earth I fled in vain. And again, and again, in secret communion with my own spirit, would I demand the questions "Who is he?—whence came he?—and what are his objects?" But no answer was found… Poor indemnity for natural rights of self-agency so pertinaciously, so insultingly denied! (Complete Tales 327)

Through his continued and growing confusion and isolation, the narrator losses his sense of self and his confidence diminishes. He is driven to insanity, as demonstrated by the pacing of the language. The narrator's inner dialogue becomes more urgent and fragmented. Poe uses punctuation to prove this shift in the narrator. Poe relies heavily on the use of dashes and exclamation points to show the rising tension in the narrator. The panic and paranoia have taken over the narrator and he is no longer capable of rational thought.

The narrator's intense alienation becomes a need, as by the end of the story he is no longer able to handle being around other people. When he is at the Carnival masquerade, he

describes his discomfort. He paranoia of his double has caused the narrator to become accustomed to his isolation. He states, “now the suffocating atmosphere of the crowded rooms irritated me beyond endurance” (Complete Tales 328). In this way, Poe addresses the distance that the narrator has put between himself and others. The narrator has developed such paranoid tendencies that he is unable to enjoy the party and connect with others. He has become fully absorbed in his perceptions of his double self, and that affords him no room to interact with the other attendants of the party . Yet, once again, it is his double that overwhelms his thoughts.

The reemergence of the double also aligns with the resurfacing of the narrator’s problems. Poe uses the repetition as a direct counterargument to sentimental literature. As sentimental literature does not allow for disturbing feelings to be properly addressed, Poe suggests that they will simply reemerge, and not always in a convenient way. The duality of the narrator is seen in the choice of his name as well. The name William, meaning both conqueror and protector, serves as a clue to his fate. In turn, the name Wilson is actually a surname derived from William, meaning that the names are one and the same. The name also alludes to the duality within the narrator himself. The narrator only presents one version of himself to society, but as time continues on, that version unravels beyond repair. Poe shows the truth of this impact when he has the narrator look at himself in the mirror and not see what was there. It is then that it becomes clear: the narrator is not fighting his double, he is fighting himself.

The theme of loneliness and alienation is present throughout several of Poe’s works. Poe plays on these themes in response to the sentimental literature that was popular of the time. Through Poe’s works “The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Man of the Crowd,” and “William Wilson,” these themes present characters who are driven mad by their isolated condition. Poe makes the point that unresolved issues and feelings can drive an individual to madness.

Ultimately, these characters are not able to overcome their situations, and they are left in worse conditions than when they started. Through these characters, Poe's argument becomes clear: more is needed than simply glossing over issues as sentimental literature did. Deep, personal issues cannot be processed through the rose-colored lens of sentimental literature. Without acknowledgment of and working through hardships, Poe argues that paranoia and tragedy will ensue.

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