Edgar Allan Poe
(1809 - 1849)

Biography
Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts to parents who were poverty-stricken actors. Early in his life, Poe's father deserted the family and at almost three years old his mother died of tuberculosis—a very painful and gruesome sickness. He and his younger brother were present at their mother's death and the two were left alone with their mother's dead body for two days before anyone found them.

Poe was then taken in and raised by the wealthy Allan family of Richmond, Virginia. Poe had many conflicts with John Allan and, subsequently, he was never formally adopted. One of these points of conflict occurred when Poe could not pay his gambling debts at the University of Virginia and he was forced, either by his father or the university, to withdraw. Soon thereafter, Poe's foster mother (John Allan's wife) died, and John Allan, in a gesture of sympathy, won Edgar an appointment to West Point. The breaking point in Poe's rocky relationship with John Allan came when Poe was dismissed from West Point for academic reasons.

Poe moved in with his aunt where he eventually fell in love with his young first cousin Virginia Clemm. In 1836 (when Virginia was 13) they were married and remained in the home of Virginia's mother. This period of time in Poe's life was one of rare happiness. The small, happy family moved several places around the country, including Pennsylvania and New York City. It was during this time (from 1836 to 1847) that Poe produced most of his great literary works.

Poe had been drinking and using drugs to some extent during this time, but it was after his beloved wife Virginia died in 1847 of Tuberculosis (the same disease that claimed his mother) that he seemed to go off the deep end. After many drinking binges, Poe had one last relatively successful year lecturing and producing works of literature and prose. On October 3, 1849, however, he was found in Baltimore, Maryland (he had been en route to New York from Richmond) half-conscious and delirious, inexplicably calling out the name of a famous polar explorer. He died the next day and was buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery in Baltimore.

Contributions to Literature
Poe's fame in the US came in a roundabout way. He was first famous with the French symbolists in France. Only through the influence of the French symbolists did he become known in his own country. His influence on criticism was quite profuse. He defined how a short story should be written. He alone invented the detective story. Poe is also responsible for furthering the gothic movement in the US. Among his literary progeny are Stephen King, Anne Rice, and Dean Koontz.

Timeline
1809 Poe is born in Boston, Massachusetts
1811 Mother dies and is orphaned
1827 Joins the army under an assumed name
Published *Tamerlane and Other Poems*
1829 Publishes *Al Aaraaf*
Poe's stepmother, Frances Allan, dies
1830 John Allan helps Poe get into West Point
1831 Publishes *Poems*; makes no money with poetry so turns to fiction and criticism
1832 Publishes 5 short stories in newspapers
1836 Poe marries Virginia Clemm, his 13 year-old cousin
1838 Publishes only novel *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*
1839 Publishes "The Fall of the House of Usher"
1836 Publishes his great mystery stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat"
1845 "The Raven" is published and gains him much acclaim.
1847 Virginia dies of Tuberculosis
1849 Publishes "Annabel Lee"
Poe dies in Baltimore under strange circumstances
Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary. 
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
5  "Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
Only this, and nothing more."
Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December:
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease\(^1\) of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
"Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—
This it is and nothing more."

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore:
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping.
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door.
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I opened wide the door:—
Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing.
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"
Merely this and nothing more.

Back then into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning.
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
"Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my window lattice; 
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—
'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
Perched upon a bust of Pallas\(^2\) just above my chamber door—
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

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1. surcease (sur sēs’): End.
2. Pallas (pāl’ as): Pallas Athena, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom.
Then this ebony bird beguiling\(^3\) my sad fancy into smiling.

By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance\(^4\) it wore.

"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou." I said, "art sure no craven.

Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—

Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian\(^5\) shore!

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly.

Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore:

For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being

Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—

Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door.

With such name as "Nevermore."

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3. beguiling (bi'gil' in) part.: Charming.
4. countenance (koun' te nans) n.: Facial expression.
5. Plutonian (plō'to' nē an) adj.: Like the underworld or infernal regions.

Refer to Pluto, Greek and Roman god of the underworld.
But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if its soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing farther than he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered, “Other friends have flown before—
On the morrow he will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.”

Then the bird said, “Nevermore.”

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
“Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of ‘Never—nevermore.”

But the Raven still beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking “Nevermore.”

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o’er,
But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o’er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
“Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe\(^7\) from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore.
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?\(^8\)—tell me—tell me, I implore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

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6. ominous (əˈmənas) adj.: Threatening; sinister.
7. nepenthe (niˈpenthē) n.: Drug that the ancient Greeks believed could relieve sorrow.
8. balm in Gilead (gīlˈe əd): In the Bible, a healing ointment made in Gilead, a region of ancient Palestine.
"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,9
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!" I shrieked, upstarting—
"Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!

Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting,
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming;
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!


Guide for Responding

Literature and Your Life

Reader's Response  What are your impressions of the poem's speaker? Explain.

Thematic Focus  What does the poem say about the dark power of the imagination?

Class Discussion  "The Raven" has been popular for well over one hundred years. Explain why you think the poem does or does not merit this continued attention.

Check Your Comprehension

1. How does the speaker respond to the noise he hears?
2. What does the speaker of "The Raven" want to forget?
3. (a) What does the speaker ask the raven? (b) What is the response? (c) What does the speaker order the raven to do?

Critical Thinking

Interpret

1. (a) During the course of "The Raven," what changes occur in the speaker's attitude toward the bird? (b) What brings about each change? (c) What does the raven finally come to represent?

Analyze

2. How does the speaker's emotional state change during the poem? (b) How are these changes related to the changes in his attitude toward the raven?

Connect

3. How is the word nevermore related to the speaker's emotional state at the end of the poem?

Apply

4. How might a psychologist explain the speaker's experience?

Synthesize
Lesson Six
Romantic Criticism

Reading Assignment
(in text)
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, excerpts from Biographia Literaria, p. 276.
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, A Defence of Poetry, p. 309.

Introduction
Romanticism as a literary movement has been a powerful force. Many of America’s “big-time” critics, such as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Frank Kermode, Northrop Frye (Canadian), Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartmann, and even the feminist Elaine Showalter have gained a reputation by returning to the likes of Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, and Shelley for their insights and subjects. The movement reached far and wide during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries, in poetry, fiction, drama, and literary theory.

The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics suggests just how difficult it is to define this literary movement; it points out that in 1948, while completing a book on the subject, F. L. Lucas counted some 11,400 definitions! Still, Romanticism (like Classicism and Neoclassicism, sometimes capitalized, sometimes not, depending on the writer) has a number of recognizable features. Some of these are a preoccupation with individual genius; an emphasis on unusual places, relationships, and states of mind; a preference for “democratic” literary forms such as ballads, folksongs, and folktales; and a preference for “the heart” over “the head”—that is, a preference for instinct, intuition, and passion over reason and systematic analysis. Romanticism “opposed to the neatly rational, universal and orderly solutions of neoclassicism the untidy and problematic world of Man—as a creator freely probing the irrational and inventing new forms, and as an individual dispossessed of beliefs, traditions, and affiliations, torn by ennui [anxiety coupled with apathy] and laden with guilt, a stranger among strangers, and a stranger unto himself” (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 721).

Here are just a few examples of works and writers who have been classified as Romantics (though not always unanimously). In Russia, Karamzin’s story of Poor Liza, a woman scorned and wronged, who died for love, was hugely popular; Pushkin gave us such masterpieces as Eugene Onegin, The Bronze Horseman, and The Queen of Spades; Lermontov and even Dostoevsky invented political romances. In Germany, Goethe and Schiller
wrote of Faust’s deal with the devil and of swashbuckling robbers, while the brothers Schlegel formulated a Romantic aesthetic (an aesthetic is a theory of art). In France, Alexander Dumas wrote of the Three Musketeers, while Victor Hugo wrote Wordsworthian ballads and regaled his readers with the sad tale of Jean Valjean, hounded all over Europe because he stole a crust of bread to feed his starving family. Also in France, the Romantic philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau had much to say about our human nature, and the Symbolistes, inspired by Baudelaire’s translations of Poe, held sway at the turn of this century. Their work deeply influenced the Anglo-American sensibilities of T. S. Eliot, whose essays you will read in Lesson Ten. The Romantics in England gave us wild Heathcliff of the desolate moors, Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday, and Tess of the D’Urbervilles (whose lot was much like that of Karamzin’s Liza). From England also came all the memorable characters from the pen of Dickens, and three of the four poet-theorists represented in this lesson—not to mention the likes of Byron, Swinburne, Blake, de Quincey, Sir Walter Scott, the Brownings, and the Scottish poet Robert Burns. In America, besides Poe, we had Hawthorne; Melville (who used many styles in addition to those associated with Romanticism, including epic and realistic techniques); the romancer of the American wilderness, James Fenimore Cooper; the purveyor of democratic vistas, Walt Whitman; and the “New England nun,” Emily Dickinson. Even the Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau had much in common with Romanticism, though they also looked to Plato’s world of ideal forms and to India in developing a worldview.

If we are going to lump all of these writers together as Romantic, what do they have in common? Of course, the anglophone theorists (anglophone means English-speaking) in our reader tell us what they mean by Romanticism, either directly or by implication, and their pronouncements are more or less representative—not so much because their insights are broader or deeper than those of the other writers just mentioned, but because they too were influenced by the general trends. (Seems that the international community of Romantics cross-pollinated like promiscuous bees.) In the last lesson you saw how Classicism and Romanticism differed. Let me stress some of those differences, since one way to determine what something is is to decide what it isn’t. First, consider the following statement, which summarizes the views of the German philosopher Friederich Schlegel (1772-1829), in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics:
Where classical literature aims at perfection of being, the romanticist, torn between the ideal and physical reality, expresses in his works the dialectics of becoming, a flux which corresponds to his inner conflict. Imagination moved by nostalgia for the infinite is that creative power which can metamorphose reality into spiritual experience. The aim of romantic creation is a sort of mystic union of the mind with a transcendental reality. (719)

Schlegel’s views here are in agreement with the Romantics we’re reading in this lesson. When Romanticism arose toward the end of the eighteenth century, it was seen as “a new mode of imagination and vision” (again, from the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 717). Whereas the Classicist had sought to mirror our world (or a higher world), the Romantic stood between worlds, as prophet or seer, often torn by inner struggles or the demands of genius, and from that difficult and dangerous promontory (or depth), sought to shine a lamp to light our way to higher realities. Note Schlegel’s emphasis on Romantic nostalgia; a “higher reality” is, by definition, most elusive, perhaps unattainable. Romantic nostalgia, struggle, and anxiety later led to Existentialism, the philosophy which arose in the nineteenth century and which continues to be influential. In Existentialism, as in Romanticism, the emphasis is on becoming, not attaining. We are thrown into this life, say the later Romantics and the Existentialists, and before death evicts us, we must create a world for ourselves by our thoughts, words, and deeds. Even when things seem most bleak, we can still prevail, by radical acts of the will. Those acts may be evident only to ourselves or may even be absurd. We have consciousness, whether we are conscious of some transcendent order of being toward which we are striving, or just conscious that we are still human beings. The distance between exalted prophet-poet and haggard survivor is thus greatly shortened by this view, and the idea that genius and madness are closely related can also be discerned here. The genius continues to swim against the current, salmon-like, toward the spawning ground of great passions and exalted ideas. The mad drown along the way.

One more general introductory observation, before turning to the readings. These writers stress two things I haven’t yet touched on: poetry’s (art’s) moral power, and the enduring value of aesthetic pleasure. These two unlikely bedfellows are related. How? We saw in Wordsworth that the artist offers beauty, not truth, and that the rightful response to beauty is to experience pleasure. Coleridge agrees with this opinion (though he disagrees with much of what Wordsworth had to say). “A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species... it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part” (280).
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. 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. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.
Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it was the apparent heart that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trilling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect appearance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the root of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through the building, its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophys which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the
black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellissed 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.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the ennuyé man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity;—these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.

In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical confirmation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that lends, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms and the general manner of their narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. "I shall perish," said he, "I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear."

I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchain'd by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated—an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence.

He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin—to the severe and long-continued illness—indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution—of a tenderly beloved
sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth. "Her decease," he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, "would leave him (him, the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers." While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother; but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the prostrating power of the destroyer; and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain—that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together, or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unrestrainedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom.

I shall ever bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphureous lustre over all. His long improvised dirges will ring forever in my ears. Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shud-
THE WORKS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

I.

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace—
Radiant palace—raised its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion—
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

II.

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow
(This—all this—was in the olden
Time long ago);
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odor went away.

III.

Wanderers in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Spirits moving musically
To a lute's well-tuned law;
Round about a throne, where sitting
(Porphyrogene)
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen.

IV.

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.

V.

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;
(Ah, let us mourn, for never more
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

VI.

And travellers now within that valley,
Through the red-lilten windows see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door;
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more.

I well remember that suggestions arising from this ballad led us into a

train of thought wherein there became manifest an opinion of Usher's
which I mention not so much on account of its novelty (for other men
have thought thus), as on account of the pertinacity with which he main-
tained it. This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all
vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a
more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the
kingdom of inorganization. I lack words to express the full extent, or the
earnest abandon of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected
(as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his fore-
fathers. The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, ful-
filled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their
arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them,
and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long un-
disturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the
still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was
to be seen, he said (and I here started as he spoke), in the gradual yet
 certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and
the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet im-
portunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the
destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what
he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.

Our books—the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of
the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict
keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such
works as the "Ververt et Chartreuse" of Gresset; the "Belphegor" of
Machiavelli; the "Heaven and Hell" of Swedenborg; the "Subterranean
Voyage of Nicholas Klimm" of Holberg; the "Chiromancy" of Robert
Flud, of Jean D'Indaginé, and of Dela Chambre; the "Journey into the
Blue Distance of Tieck"; and the "City of the Sun of Campanella." One
favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the "Directorium Inquisi-
torium," by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were pas-
sages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African Satyrs and Egyptians.

1 Watson, Dr. Percival, Spallanzani, and especially the Bishop of Landaff.—See
"Chemical Essays," vol. v.
over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, how­ever, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic—the manual of a forgotten church—the Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Magonae.

I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution.

At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body being having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powders, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp, grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character,
I had taken but few turns in this manner, when a light step on an adjoining staircase arrested my attention. I presently recognized it as that of Usher. In an instant afterward he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan—but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained hysteric in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me—but any thing was preferable to the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief.

"And you have not seen it?" he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence—"you have not then seen it?—but, stay! you shall!" Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm.

The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this—yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars, nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.

"You must not—you shall not behold this!" said I, shuddering, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. "These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement;—the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen:—and so we will pass away this terrible night together."

The antique volume which I had taken up was the "Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning; but I had called it a favorite of Usher's more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand; and I indulged a vague hope that the excitement which now agitated the hypochondriac, might find relief (for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies) even in the extremeness of the folly which I should read. Could I have judged, indeed, by the wild overstrained air of vivacity with which he hearkened, or apparently hearkened, to the words of the tale, I might well have congratulated myself upon the success of my design.

I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force. Here, it will be remembered, the words of the narrative run thus:

"And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and maliceful turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest."

At the termination of this sentence I started and, for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stilled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention; for, amid the rattling of the sashes of the casements, and the ordinary commingled noises of the still increasing storm, the sound, in itself, had nothing, surely, which should have interested or disturbed me. I continued the story:

"But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the maliceful hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend enwritten—"

Who entereth here, a conqueror hath bin;
Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.

And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pestly breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard."
ment—for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer.

Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the occurrence of this second and most extraordinary coincidence, by a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant, I still retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting, by any observation, the sensitive nervousness of my companion. I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds in question; although, assuredly, a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes, taken place in his demeanor. From a position fronting my own, he had gradually brought round his chair, so as to sit with his face to the door of the chamber; and thus I could but partially perceive his features, although I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head had dropped upon his breast—yet I knew that he was not asleep, from the wide and rigid opening of the eye as I caught a glance of it in profile. The motion of his body, too, was at variance with this idea—for he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway. Having rapidly taken notice of all this, I resumed the narrative of Sir Launcelot, which thus proceeded:

“And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound.”

No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than—as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver—I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled, reverberation. Completely unnerved, I leaped to my feet; but the measured rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a stony rigidity. But, as I placed my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending closely over him, I at length drank in the hideous import of his words.

“Now hear it—yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I dared not—I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! And now—to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh! whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her step on the stairs? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Marlowe!”—here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—“Marlowe! I tell you that she now stands without the door!”

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher."
shrouded figure the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

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Guide for Responding

♦ Literature and Your Life

Reader’s Response What images from the story linger in your mind? Why?

Thematic Focus In this story, the narrator barely escapes being drawn into Roderick’s fantasy world. Were you drawn into the fantasy world of the story? What was the effect of the story upon your imagination? Explain.

☑ Check Your Comprehension

1. Why has the narrator come to the Usher house?
2. When the narrator meets Usher, what startles him most about Usher’s appearance and behavior?
3. To what is Usher a “bounden slave”?
4. What opinion does Usher offer following his performance of “The Haunted Palace”?
5. What does the narrator find striking about Madeline’s dead body?
6. (a) What noises does the narrator hear in the midst of reading the Mad Tryst? (b) How does Usher explain these noises? (c) What happens immediately after Usher finishes his explanation?

♦ Critical Thinking

INTERPRET

1. How is the appearance of the interior of the house of Usher related to Usher’s appearance and to the condition of his mind? [Connect]
2. Critics have argued that Madeline and Roderick are actually physical and mental components of the same being. What evidence is there in the story to support this claim? [Support]
3. What is the significance of the fact that, rather than helping Usher, the narrator finds himself infected by Usher’s condition? [Analyze]
4. What message does this story convey about the importance of maintaining contact with the outside world? Support your answer. [Draw Conclusions]

EVALUATE

5. Poe’s story may suggest that the human imagination is capable of producing false perceptions of reality. Do you agree with this suggestion? Why or why not? [Evaluate]

COMPARE LITERARY WORKS

6. Compare this story with Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker” (p. 236). How does each address the dark side of human experience? [Compare]
The Psychology of "The Tell-Tale Heart"

E. Arthur Robinson

In the following selection, Poe scholar E. Arthur Robinson examines the psychological motivation of the two main characters as well as certain elements in the story "The Tell-Tale Heart." Robinson is especially fascinated by Poe's use of suspended slow motion in the tale, how this technique influences the action of the two main characters and the reader's response to the effect. He concludes that the narrator's hatred for the old man in the tale is an allegory for the loathing of self-discovery.

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" consists of a monologue in which an accused murderer protests his sanity rather than his innocence. The point of view is the criminal's, but the tone is ironic in that his protestation of sanity produces an opposite effect upon the reader. From these two premises stem multiple levels of action in the story. The criminal, for example, appears obsessed with defending his physical self at whatever cost, but actually his drive is self-destructive since successful defense upon either implied charge—of murder or of criminal insanity—automatically involves admission of guilt upon the other.

Specifically the narrator bases his plea upon the assumption that madness is incompatible with systematic action, and as evidence of his capacity for the latter he relates how he has executed a horrible crime with rational precision. He reiterates this argument until it falls into a pattern: "If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for concealment of the body." At the same time he discloses a deep psychological confusion. Almost casually he admits lack of normal motivation: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man." Yet in spite of this affection he says that the idea of murder "haunted me day and night." Since such processes of reasoning tend to convict the speaker of madness, it does not seem out of keeping that he is driven to confession by "hearing" reverberations of the still-beating heart in the corpse he has dismembered, nor that he appears unaware of the irrationalities in his defense of rationality.

At first reading, the elements of "The Tell-Tale Heart" appear simple: the story itself is one of Poe's shortest; it contains only two main characters, both unnamed, and three indistinguishable police officers; even the setting of the narration is left unspecified. In the present study my object is to show that beneath its narrative flow the story illustrates the elaboration of design which Poe customarily sought, and also that it contains two of the major psychological themes dramatized in his longer works.

It is important to note that Poe's theory of art emphasizes development almost equally with unity of effect. There must be, he insists, "a repetition of purpose," a "dropping of the water upon the rock," thus he calls heavily upon the artist's craftsmanship to devise thematic modifications of the "preconceived effect." A favorite image in his stories is that of arabesque ornamentation with repetitive design. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" one can distinguish several such recurring devices filling out the "design" of the tale, the most evident being what the narrator calls his "over acuteness of the senses." He incorporates this physical keenness into his plea of sanity: "... why will you say that I am mad? The disease has sharpened my senses—not destroyed, not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute." He likens the sound of the old man's heart to the ticking of a watch "enveloped in cotton" and then fancies that its terrified beating may arouse the neighbors. His sensitivity to sight is equally disturbing, for it is the old man's eye, "a pale blue eye, with a film over it," which first vexed him and which he seeks to destroy. Similar though less extreme powers are ascribed to the old man. For example, the murderer congratulates himself that not even his victim could have detected anything wrong with the floor which has been replaced over the body, and earlier he imagines the old man, awakened by "the first slight noise," listening to determine whether the sound has come from an intruder or "the wind in the chimney." Variations such as these give the sensory details a the-
matic significance similar to that of the “morbid acuteness of the senses” of Roderick Usher in “The Fall of the House of Usher” or the intensity with which the victim of the Inquisition hears, sees, and smells his approaching doom in “The Pit and the Pendulum.”

These sensory data provide the foundation for an interesting psychological phenomenon in the story. As the characters listen in the darkness, intervals of strained attention are prolonged until the effect resembles that of slow motion. Thus for seven nights the madman enters the room so “very, very slowly” that it takes him an hour to get his head through the doorway; as he says, “a watch’s minute-hand moves more quickly than did mine.” When on the eighth night the old man is alarmed, “for a whole hour I did not move a muscle.” Later he is roused to fury by the man’s terror, but “even yet,” he declares, “I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed.” On different nights both men sit paralyzed in bed, listening for terrors real or imagined. After the murder is completed, “I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes.” In the end it seems to his overstrained nerves that the police officers linger inordinately in the house, chatting and smiling, until he is driven frantic by their cheerful persistence.

**The Architectural Principle**

This psychological process is important to “The Tell-Tale Heart” in two ways. First, reduplication of the device gives the story structural power. Poe here repeats a dominating impression at least seven times in a brief story. Several of the instances mentioned pertain to plot, but others function to emphasize the former and to provide aesthetic satisfaction. To use Poe’s words, “by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale, its thesis, has been presented unblemished…” Here Poe is speaking specifically of “skillfully-constructed tales,” and the complementary aspects of technique described are first to omit extraneous material and second to combine incidents, tone, and style to develop the “pre-established design.” In this manner, form and “idea” become one. The thematic repetition and variation of incident in “The Tell-Tale Heart” offer one of the clearest examples of this architectural principle of Poe’s at work.

Second, this slow-motion technique intensifies the subjectivity of “The Tell-Tale Heart” beyond that attained by mere use of a narrator. In the psychological triad of stimulus, internal response, and action, the first and third elements are slighted and the middle stage is given exaggerated attention. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” stimulus in an objective sense scarcely exists at all. Only the man’s eye motivates the murderer, and that almost wholly through his internal reaction to it. The action too, though decisive, is quickly over: “In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him.” In contrast, the intermediate, subjective experience is prolonged to a point where psychologically it is beyond objective measurement. At first the intervals receive conventional description—an “hour,” or “many minutes”—but eventually such designations become meaningless and duration can be presented only in terms of the experience itself. Thus, in the conclusion of the story, the ringing in the madman’s ears first is “fancied,” then later becomes “distinct,” then is discovered to be so “definite” that it is erroneously accorded external actuality, and finally grows to such obsessive proportions that it drives the criminal into an emotional and physical frenzy. Of the objective duration of these stages no information is given; the experience simply “continued” until “at length” the narrator “found” that its quality had changed.

Through such psychological handling of time Poe achieves in several of his most effective stories, including “The Tell-Tale Heart,” two levels of chronological development which are at work simultaneously throughout the story. Typically, the action reaches its most intense point when the relation between the objective and subjective time sense falters or fails. At this point too the mental world of the subject is at its greatest danger of collapse. Thus we have the mental agony of the bound prisoner who loses all count of time as he alternately swoons and lives intensified existence while he observes the slowly descending pendulum. The narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” specifically refuses to accept responsibility for objective time-correlations: “There was another interval of insensibility; it was brief; for, upon again lapsing into life, there had been no perceptible descent in the pendulum. But it might have been long; for I knew there were demons who took note of my swoon, and who could have arrested the vibration at pleasure.” These demons are his In-
quisitional persecutors, but more subjective “demons” are at work in the timeless terror and fascination of the mariner whirled around the abyss in “The Descent into the Maelstrom,” or the powerless waiting of Usher for days after he first hears his sister stirring within the tomb. In each instance the objective world has been reduced to the microcosm of an individual’s experience; his time sense fades under the pressure of emotional stress and physical paralysis.

**A Symbolic Paralysis**

Even when not literally present, paralysis often may be regarded as symbolic in Poe’s stories. In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1858), Pym’s terrifying dreams in the hold of the ship represent physical and mental paralysis: “Had a thousand lives hung upon the movement of a limb or the utterance of a syllable, I could have neither stirred nor spoken. . . . I felt that my powers of body and mind were fast leaving me.” Other examples are the “convolutions” of bonds about the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the death-grasp on the ring-bolt in “The Descent into the Maelstrom,” the inaction of Roderick and (more literally) the catalepsy of Madeline Usher, and in part the supposed rationality of the madman in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which turns out to be subservience of his mental to his emotional nature. In most applications of the slow-motion technique in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” three states of being are present concurrently: emotional tension, loss of mental grasp upon the actualities of the situation, and inability to act or to act deliberately. Often these conditions both invite and postpone catastrophe, with the effect of focusing attention upon the intervening experience.

In the two years following publication of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Poe extended this timeless paralysis to fantasies of hypnosis lasting beyond death. “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844) contains speculations about the relation between sensory experience and eternity. In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845) the hypnotized subject is maintained for nearly seven months in a state of suspended “death” and undergoes instant dissolution when revived. His pleading for either life or death indicates his internal condition had included awareness and suffering. Similarly the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” records: “Oh God! what could I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore!” while all the time the police officers notice no foaming nor raving, for still they “chatted pleasantly, and smiled.” His reaction is still essentially subjective, although he paces the room and grates his chair upon the boards above the beating heart. All these experiences move toward ultimate collapse which is reached in “The Tell-Tale Heart” as it is for Usher and the hypnotized victims, while a last-moment reprieve is granted in “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Descent into the Maelstrom.”

A second major theme in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the murderer’s psychological identification with the man he kills. Similar sensory details connect the two men. The vulture eye which the subject casts upon the narrator is duplicated in the “single dim ray” of the lantern that falls upon his own eye; like the unshuttered lantern, it is always one eye that is mentioned, never two. One man hears the creaking of the lantern hinge, the other the slipping of a finger upon the fastening. Both lie awake at midnight “hearkening to the death-watches in the wall.” The loud yell of the murderer is echoed in the old man’s shriek, which the narrator, as though with increasing clairvoyance, later tells the police was his own. Most of all the identity is implied in the key psychological occurrence in the story—the madman’s mistaking his own heartbeat for that of his victim, both before and after the murder.

**Slow-Motion Technique**

These two psychological themes—the indefinite extension of subjective time and the psychic merging of killer and killed—are linked closely together in the story. This is illustrated in the narrator’s commentary after he has awakened the old man by an incautious sound and each waits for the other to move:

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all of the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—“Is it nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor,” or “it is merely a cricket
which has made a single chirp." Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain.

Here the slow-motion technique is applied to both characters, with emphasis upon first their subjective experience and second the essential identity of that experience. The madman feels compelled to delay the murder until his subject is overcome by the same nameless fears that have possessed his own soul. The groan is an "echo" of these terrors within. The speaker has attempted a kind of catharsis by forcing his own inner horror to arise in his companion and then feeding his self-pity upon it. This pity cannot prevent the murder, which is a further attempt at exorcism. The final two sentences of the paragraph quoted explain why he believes that destruction is inevitable:

All in vain; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to feel the presence of my head within the room.

The significance of these sentences becomes clearer when we consider how strikingly the over-all effect of time-extension in "The Tell-Tale Heart" resembles that produced in Poe's "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," published two years earlier. In Monos's account of dying and passing into eternity, he prefaces his final experience with a sensory acuteness similar to that experienced by the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart." "The senses were unusually active," Monos reports, "though eccentrically so...." As the five senses fade in death, they are not utterly lost but merge into a sixth—of simple duration:

Motion in the animal frame had fully ceased. No muscle quivered; no nerve thrilled; no artery throbbed. But there seems to have sprung up in the brain... a mental pendulous pulsation... By its aid I measured the irregularities of the clock upon the mantel, and of the watches of the attendants. And this—this keen, perfect, self-existing sentiment of duration... this sixth sense, upspringing from the ashes of the rest, was the first obvious and certain step of the intemporal soul upon the threshold of the temporal Eternity.

Likewise the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" listens as though paralyzed, unable either to move or to hear anything that will dissolve his fears. This resembles Monos' sensory intensity and the cessation of "motion in the animal frame." Also subjective time is prolonged, becomes partially divorced from objective measurement, and dominates it. The most significant similarity comes in the conclusion of the experience. The old man does not know it but he is undergoing the same dissolution as Monos. He waits in vain for his fear to subside because actually it is "Death" whose shadow is approaching him, and "it was the mournful influence of that shadow that caused him to feel" his destroyer within the room. Like Monos, beyond his normal senses he has arrived at a "sixth sense," which is at first duration and then death.

But if the old man is nearing death so too must be the narrator, who has felt the same "mortal terror" in his own bosom. This similarity serves to unify the story. In Poe's tales, extreme sensitivity of the senses usually signalizes approaching death, as in the case of Monos and of Roderick Usher. This "over acuteness" in "The Tell-Tale Heart," however, pertains chiefly to the murderer, while death comes to the man with the "vulture eye." By making the narrator dramatize his feelings in the old man, Poe draws these two motifs together. We must remember, writes one commentator upon the story, "that the criminal sought his own death in that of his victim, and that he had in effect become the man who now lies dead." Symbolically this is true. The resurgence of the beating heart shows that the horrors within himself, which the criminal attempted to identify with the old man and thus destroy, still live. In the death of the old man he sought to kill a part of himself, but his "demons" could not be exorcised through murder, for he himself is their destined victim.

From this point of view, the theme of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is self-destruction through extreme subjectivity marked paradoxically by both an excess of sensitivity and temporal solipsism. How seriously Poe could take this relativity of time and experience is evident in the poetic philosophy of his Eureka (1849). There time is extended almost infinitely into the life-cycle of the universe, but that cycle itself is only one heartbeat of God, who is the ultimate subjectivity. Romantically, indeed, Poe goes even further in the conclusion to Eureka and sees individual man becoming God, enclosing reality within himself, and acting as his own creative agent. In this state, distinction between subjective and objective fades: "the sense of individual identity will be
gradually merged in the general consciousness." Destruction then becomes self-destruction, the madman and his victim being aspects of the same universal identity. Death not only is self-willed but takes on some of the sanctity of creative and hence destructive Deity. The heartbeat of the red slayer and the slain merge in Poe's metaphysical speculations as well as in the denouement of a horror story.

**AN UNRESOLVED ENDING**

This extreme subjectivity, moreover, leaves the ethical problem of "The Tell-Tale Heart" unresolved. In the opening paragraph of the story is foreshadowed an issue of good and evil connected with the speaker's madness: "I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?" To be dramatically functional such an issue must be related to the murder. The only outward motivation for the murder is irritation at "the vulture eye." It is the evil of the eye, not the old man (whom he "loved"), that the murderer can no longer live with, and to make sure that it is destroyed he will not kill the man while he is sleeping. What the "Evil Eye" represents that it so arouses the madman we do not know, but since he sees himself in his companion the result is self-knowledge. Vision becomes insight, the "Evil Eye" an evil "I," and the murdered man a victim sacrificed to a self-constituted deity. In this story, we have undeveloped hints of the self-abhorrence uncovered in "William Wilson" and "The Imp of the Perverse." Poe also has left unresolved the story's ultimate degree of subjectivity. No objective setting is provided; so completely subjective is the narration that few or no points of alignment with the external world remain. From internal evidence, we assume the speaker to be mad, but whether his words constitute a defense before some criminal tribunal or the complete fantasy of a madman there is no way of ascertaining.

Although written in 1839 ... "The Fall of the House of Usher" seems a thesaurus not only of Gothic clichés but also of nearly all of Poe's obsessional motifs; here joined together in a dazzling, garish, and intricately consistent pattern of concentric meanings. Because all tends toward the final annihilation, some critics have succumbed to the temptation to read the tale as a dramatization of Eureka [another Poe novel]. True, all of Poe's tales partake of the same fixities which he so bravely schematized there, yet I do not believe that any writer of successful fictions undertakes to tell a tale in order to demonstrate his theory of the cosmos. On the contrary, he more likely is driven by the imaginative pressure of his fictions to construct such a theory that will justify and explain them. . . .

In "The Fall of the House of Usher" Poe completes what seems to me the tripartite division of functions in his most
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