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# An Effect All Together Unexpected: The Grotesque In Edgar Allan Poe's Fiction

Clinton M. Bryant  
*University of Vermont*

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AN EFFECT ALL TOGETHER UNEXPECTED: THE GROTESQUE IN EDGAR  
ALLAN POE'S FICTION

A Thesis Presented

by

Clinton Bryant

to

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of

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Thesis Examination Committee:

Anthony Magistrale, Ph.D., Advisor  
Alan Tinkler, Ph.D., Chairperson  
Elizabeth Fenton, Ph.D.  
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

## ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe is everywhere. His influence resonates not only in American literary criticism, but in popular culture where Homer and Bart Simpson act out “The Raven” in an episode of *The Simpsons* and Poe can be seen getting into a rap battle with Stephen King on the popular YouTube video series *Epic Rap Battles*. While a great deal has been written about the significance of Poe’s oeuvre, few scholars have focused primarily on the grotesque in his short fiction. This thesis will explore Edgar Allan Poe’s aesthetic influences, his place within the gothic tradition and describe the three elements that create his specific grotesque aesthetic: the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space. This thesis will describe how these elements whether in the unnamed narrator’s bridal suite in “Ligeia” or the protagonist of “The Pit and the Pendulum” experiencing the apparatus of torture during the Spanish Inquisition, create a sense of indeterminacy, trapped between pain and pleasure, beauty and terror, life and death. Analyzing Poe’s texts this thesis will describe these grotesque figurations and what these constructions mean narratively and artistically and how they inform the author’s larger intellectual goals.

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## INTRODUCTION: READING THE GROTESQUE

Edgar Allan Poe meets you where you live. Beyond the biography and the psychology of Poe, the simple fact remains that his stories and tales confront us in our own backyards, asserting in no uncertain terms that darkness originates inside the individual. Retrospectively, I understand that all of his protagonist's stories begin with a dissatisfaction with the world as it appears. The discovery of Edgar Allan Poe's multiplicity is a type of dark descent of its own. Graduate school was a reappraisal of the stories I'd loved as a teenager. They came before my eyes with new intrigues along with older, deeper questions about the conflicted feelings Poe's stories always elicit. Poe's tale always left me with questions: What does Poe mean by the terrorized conclusion of "Ligeia?" Shouldn't the narrator be overjoyed at the renewal of his lost bond with Ligeia? What does Roderick Usher's strange twin sister or the consuming tarn that swallows the story mean? Why does the narrator of "The Pit and The Pendulum" appear invigorated by the blade rushing down to kill him?

Questions in Poe are arbiters of his effects and they often accumulate with no clear answers, only approximate meanings and sensations. Throughout my coursework, I explored Poe's history and place within the canon of American literature, along with reading critical appraisals of his work. While psychoanalytical criticism was the Rosetta stone for Poe studies for many years, these possible explanations of Poe's obsessive characters never really answered my own questions. They identified character pathology or noted a historical resemblance identified later in Freud but they didn't fully describe the collective effects of the stories.

Identifying a strand of compulsion or the death drive underwhelmed the massive amounts of varying sensation within each story. Looking at Poe in a slightly different context we must answer the questions that arise not from the annihilation many characters endure, the murders they perform or the occult powers that roil around the conclusion of many tales, but what is meant by the effect, and how these effects are enacted? What is Poe emphasizing by creating short fiction with these aims? These are the questions I have set out to answer.

Edgar Allan Poe's first collection of stories was titled *Tales of the Arabesque and Grotesque*. In the preface to the volume Poe writes, "The epithets "Grotesque" and "Arabesque" will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published. But from the fact that, during a period of some two or three years, I have written five-and-twenty short stories whose general character may be so briefly defined, it cannot be fairly inferred — at all events it is not truly inferred — that I have, for this species of writing, any inordinate, or indeed any peculiar taste or prepossession. I may have written with an eye to this publication in volume form, and may, therefore, have desired to preserve, as far as a certain point, a certain unity of design" (Tales of Grotesque and Arabesque Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore website). Obviously, Poe views the terms grotesque and arabesque as indicators of craft rather than a philosophical dimension. Creating unity is assembling a series of elements in which the whole must emphasize a desired effect, which allows us to ask, what exactly does Poe hope to do by creating these effects?

The grotesque from its earliest designation concerned the ornamental or decorative form. The word "grotesque" is linked to the word 'grotto': the English word

derives from the Italian *pittura grottesca*, meaning a work (or painting) found in a grotto and refers to the room in ancient buildings in Rome which were excavated to reveal murals in a grotesque style” (Edwards and Graulund 3). The grotesque style was created by melding incongruent visual components. Often the grotesque figure showed both vegetable and animal figures attached to a singular body or design. In Daniel Hoffman’s book *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* he further defines the arabesque in terms of Poe’s writing, “In an art work grotesque signifies the depiction of monsters in an elaborate, foliated setting; while arabesque refers to an intricate pattern, geometric in design, which does not reproduce the human form—this latter element deriving in a work of art of that divine image, the human body” (203). The strength of these visual elements infiltrate many of Poe’s stories adding to the unity of design while evoking a sumptuous visual component to his prose which speaks to perhaps why many of these tales have been illustrated or made into films. To ignore the visual element in Poe is to ignore Poe himself. Edgar Allan Poe, the writer, is multiform—so that to understand Poe is to understand the effects of his stories textually and visually. The grotesque fits the occasion, acting both as a visual and philosophical process; the designation allows us to explore Poe’s multivalent tales, analyzing the aesthetic, historical, and affective ruptures of each fiction. This thesis has come to focus on the grotesque in Poe’s short fiction, tracing three elements: the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space.

The first chapter includes a brief description of Poe’s influences in the 18<sup>th</sup> century citing Edmund Burke’s writing, Horace Walpole’s generative Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, and Henry Fuseli’s painting *The Nightmare*. Establishing these formalizing influences for Edgar Allan Poe, the chapter then situates the author in the context of the



Gothic. Establishing both Poe's influences and his place in the American Gothic tradition, the rest of the chapter explores the concept of the grotesque, defining the alien within the familiar and speaking conceptually of how these elements surface in Poe's fiction.

The second chapter discusses Poe's specific use of the grotesque, describing three elements used to create the indeterminate effects in his fiction: the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space. These elements work in conjunction yet their effect is not totalizing. The three parts of Poe's grotesque construct the indeterminate, emphasizing the affective place of the reader, how the obsessive designs of the various protagonist are often swamped with chaos, and how Poe's constructs haptic spaces.

Edgar Allan Poe's art is concerned with the act of creation. His protagonists are visionaries and artists who funnel personal loss and obsession into a creation that troubles the thread of what it means to exist. Their discontent with the world as it appears inspires them with a compulsive obsession to create and it is this insistence, the desire to alter the rational world, which creates chaos. This thesis sets out to answer questions about Poe's narrative world including, what are his key influences, how does the grotesque fulfill his creative mission, and how does he construct these effects? Throughout the following chapters, I hope to answer these questions along with giving greater perspective on how the short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe operates.

# CHAPTER 1: THE GOTHIC INFLUENCES AND GROTESQUE EFFECTS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

## 1.1. Introduction

While Edgar Allan Poe is most often identified as a Gothic writer, his relationship with many different forms of writing—from criticism, poetry, and genres of his own inventions such as detective fiction—is centered on exemplifying the concepts of beauty and the sublime. However, Poe does not simply write tales that elucidate these subjects, but rather engages the reader on the level of bodily as well as intellectual affect. Poe’s tales often have no moral impulse. His stories offer very little explication of events as didactic revelations, but rather leave the reader with a sensation of indeterminacy, mingling fear with many other sensations, such as humor, absurdity, the beauty of the artifact of the story, and intellectual curiosity at how the mechanism of the narrative has created this moment of elliptical dread. This chapter will trace Edgar Allan Poe’s aesthetic back to three eighteenth century influences, namely Edmund Burke’s theories on the beautiful and the sublime in the treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; Horace Walpole’s seminal Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*; and Henry Fuseli’s painting *The Nightmare*. These three influences lay the groundwork for illustrating Poe’s aesthetic concerns. Connecting his interest in Burke’s aesthetic categories of the sublime and beautiful, Walpole’s Gothic form, and Henry Fuseli’s visual evocation, the rest of the chapter will explore Poe’s place as an American Gothic writer.

## 1.2. 18th Century Influences

Any study of Edgar Allan Poe's aesthetic must necessarily start with the eighteenth century. The political, scientific, and philosophical changes occurring during this time affected numerous writers, poets, and visual artists. Poe's fiction is an interesting combination of influences from this time. While Poe was influenced by writers like Shakespeare and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, each evoking their own grotesque styles, the three individuals I've decided to examine below contributed fundamental elements to Poe's aesthetic. Tracing these influences then is similar to what Poe believes is the central project of art, the emphasizing of effects. The influences of Edmund Burke's aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, Horace Walpole's invention of the Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, and Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* describe the diverse visual and philosophical influences inherent in Poe's fiction. The through line from Burke to Walpole to Fuseli maps Poe's most important influences, describing how his fiction is steeped in the clash between Enlightenment rationality versus Romantic emotionalism, the latter emphasizing inspiration and subjectivity. Enlightenment thought was meant to banish the older beliefs in tradition and allow for a society structured on the notion of progress. Romanticism was based on individuality, emotion, and a glorification of the past. We see the clash between these ideals in Poe's work with the subjectivity of his protagonists, the faux scientific descriptions of phenomenon and the manic and obsessive pathologies of many characters. These three eighteenth century examples describe aesthetic, literary, or visual properties which appear in Poe's tales.

### 1.2.1. Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime

Edmund Burke's theory of the beautiful and the sublime defined two aesthetic categories that Edgar Allan Poe explored in almost all his tales. Burke's treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) explores the concept of the sublime in art and nature. Previously identified in *On Sublimity* by the Greek rhetorician Longinus as a quality in language or an expression of spirit, Burke sought to describe both the category of the sublime and the beautiful as effects in nature and language (Leitch 450). Often the sublime is expressed as terror at the immensity of a natural phenomenon like a tidal wave or avalanche—an element that is naturally beautiful, but also evokes what Burke calls astonishment. Describing these categories, Burke defines the terms that are often connected with beauty and the sublime, pleasure and pain. Burke views pain and pleasure not as negatives of each other, meaning pain happens when pleasure is taken away and by relation, pleasure occurs when pain leaves. Burke describes pain as the more powerful emotion, writing, "Let us recollect in what state we have found our minds upon escaping some imminent danger, or on being released from the severity of some cruel pain. We have on such occasions found, if I am not much mistaken, the temper of our minds in a tenor very remote from that which attends the presence of positive pleasure; we have found them in a state of much sobriety, impressed with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquility shadowed with horror. The fashion of the countenance and the gesture of the body on such occasion is so correspondent to this state of mind, that any person, a stranger to the cause of the appearance, would rather judge us under some consternation than in the enjoyment of anything like positive pleasure (456). Burke's description of the sublime as tranquility shadowed with horror is

based on the concept of mediation. Only through a studied distance can the viewer or reader experience the sense of danger that elicits this type of sensation. This studied distance allows the reader to experience terror without being in actual physical danger. Poe often employs this mediated space within his stories, usually employing first-person narrators so the reader experiences the fear and trepidation of the character. The narrator from “The Fall of the House of Usher” allows the reader to witness the strange accounts of Usher and his sister while fleeing in terror as the house tumbles down around the narrator. The studied distance emphasizes a reader implicated by the proceedings of the stories and by the intensity of his or her reading while not actually fearing for his or her life.

Another implication of the sublime is self-preservation. Burke notes that because terror fills the mind, the sublime offers a more powerful emotion than the beautiful. Burke writes, “The ideas of pain, sickness, death, fill the mind with strong emotions or horror; but life and health, though they put us in a capacity of being affected with pleasure, they make no such impression by the simple enjoyment. The passions therefore which are conversant about the preservation of the individual, turn chiefly on pain and danger, and they are the most powerful of all passions” (458). In many of Poe’s works, the reader is imperiled by the foreboding and strange atmosphere of the narrative and the violent conclusion that ensues. Pain and sickness is a consistent through line in Poe’s stories and tales from the illness that resembles death in “Bernice” and “Ligeia” to Lenore the narrator’s lost love in “The Raven.” Pain and sickness are usually catalysts for more violent action like the narrator’s extraction of Bernice teeth, the resurrection of

Ligeia or the haunting interaction between the narrator of “The Raven” and the erstwhile bird.

Along with Burke’s notions of the sublime and the importance of studied distance from the terror, two other concepts are central to Poe’s aesthetic: grief and beauty. Analyzing the concept of pleasure and pain, Burke finds that pleasure can be obtained in a painful experience like grief. Burke writes, “That grief should be willingly endured, though far from a simply pleasing sensation, is not so difficult to be understood. It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all circumstances that attend it, even to the last minuteness; to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each, and to find a thousand new perfections in all, that were not sufficiently understood before; in grief, the pleasure is still uppermost; and the affliction we suffer has no resemblance to absolute pain, which is always odious, and which we endeavor to shake off as soon as possible”(458). The luxuriance of grief is a frequent emphasis in Poe’s fiction. As Poe writes in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (1379). Grief is frequently portrayed as an exploration of beauty and death, topics that overlap with Burke’s notions of pleasure and pain. As Burke describes, the emphasis on grief as an almost pleasurable experience that allows the grieving to constantly repeat the circumstance of sorrow is central to works like “Ligeia” and “The Raven” where each narrator create structures whether physically or narratively that replicate the trauma of their grief.

While Burke regards pleasure as something that can be found in expressions of ostensibly painful situations like grief, he emphasizes that beauty comes with a

uniformity and relaxation that brings pleasure. Within these notions of the sublime and beautiful, we have two very different effects, the former caused by terror and the latter caused by pleasure. Burke's theory was important because it placed these concepts in a purely interpretive context, emphasizing the perceptions of the sublime and beautiful as an important factor in judging literature and art. Similarly, Poe expresses an interest in the effects of the beautiful, citing it as consideration when creating a literary work. Poe writes in "The Philosophy of Composition": "When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect — they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul — not of intellect, or of heart — upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful'" (1376). Poe emphasizes the pleasure of the beautiful as a sensual manifestation—one that similar to Burke's sublime affects the reader with astonishment—a space that is neither wholly intellectually or physical, but an adulteration of the two categories. Like Burke's description of grief as a pleasurable pain, Poe defines a space in which terror and beauty are inherent. Poe often creates characters that are grieving for a beautiful dead woman and who constantly relive or recreate this trauma whether through a narrative or by designing a physical space that embodies that sorrow. Most often these stories end with a combustive terror as the narrator's design is overrun and at the conclusion of the narrative the reader is left in this astonished space that mimics the narrator's terror. Burke describes this sensation as astonishment which is "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (Burke 53). Astonishment is something Poe frequently employs, concluding the story as

the narrator of “Bernice” stares at the teeth he’s pried from her mouth, as the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” cries for the police to tear up the floorboards to uncover the old man he’s murdered, even as Arthur Gordon Pym describes the giant milky figure that has risen in his boat’s path there is an elliptical moment in which the story comes to a climax and the reader is left with a fearful tableau.

Burke’s theory of the sublime describes an aesthetic in which Poe would base his stories, emphasizing ideas of pain and pleasure in order to affect the reader bodily and create moments of astonishment. Pointing out that Burke’s concepts emphasize visual excitation, Frederick L. Burwick writes, “As an author who dedicated his literary genius to the evocation of terror, Poe skillfully exploited the visual attributes of the sublime as set forth by Burke and others. The sublime, as he often insisted, was not opposed to, but rather a part of the beautiful” (424). Poe emphasizes the beautiful and the sublime in order to create a grotesque aesthetic that makes the beautiful and the sublime indistinguishable. While Poe’s aesthetic owes much to Burke’s categories, the Gothic novel was another important aspect in Poe’s development. Taking on the demands of what Burke describes as the pleasurable pain of grief, the Gothic novel emphasized the repetition of events whether the sins of the father repeating themselves in the life of the son or the Gothic villain’s continual pursuit of a heroine. This structuring element allowed Poe to create the texture of grief in literary form.

### **1.2.2. Horace Walpole’s Gothic novel**

Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* was the first Gothic novel, creating a genre and a blueprint for novels that followed. Originally the term Gothic was derogatory, connoting ignorance and barbarism that harkened back to the medieval



invaders the Goths whose invasion and destruction of Rome signaled a decline in reason and civilization. By the time Walpole introduced his novel in 1764, the term (much like the fledgling form) was being recreated. The novel had very few antecedents so Walpole's combination of romantic elements of the supernatural with aspects of realistic description fashioned a singular work redefining the incipient form. Along with these narrative aspects of realism and fantasy, Walpole integrated the medieval romance with the novelistic form. His designation of the novel as 'Gothic' is an allusion to the form of a previous age. Walpole's Gothic novel deals with anachronism intertextually by framing the novel as an antique manuscript discovered in a drawer and also as a narrative that takes place in the medieval past. The events of the novel center around Manfred the lord of the castle of Otranto, who it has been prophesized will lose possession of his kingdom. In an effort to consolidate power and ensure his family line, he tries to marry his son Conrad to Princess Isabella. When a giant helmet falls out of the sky and kills Conrad before he can marry, Manfred becomes terrified and desperate to ensure the prophecy won't come to pass. The rest of the narrative follows Manfred's obsession with preventing the prophecy from coming true. The novel describes the lengths Manfred will go to keep power, along with the rise of Theodore, a peasant, who possess noble blood and eventually disposes Manfred, thus fulfilling the prophesy.

Walpole emphasizes many elements that become quintessential to Poe's most famous stories. As Markman Ellis writes in *The History of Gothic Fiction* "[T]he Gothic is often located in the distant past or a distant foreign location. It often incorporates older or traditional plots, and it has recourse to fantastical or supernatural events, that cannot be justified or analyzed by empirical method" (21). Similarly, Poe's fiction takes place in an

undefined past. Prince Prospero rules over a medieval kingdom in “The Masque of the Red Death” while the narrator lures Fortunato to his death during a carnival in “The Cask of Amontillado” and the diminutive Hop Frog, a court jester, gains his vengeance against an abusive king and his court in the story of the same title.

Walpole fashioned a narrative that emphasizes the pervasiveness of the supernatural in the medieval world view as opposed to scientific knowledge or rational thought. Similarly, Poe places his narratives in the permissive past, an age in which the rational and irrational were less formalized as binaries. Doing so allows Poe to create the turbulent juxtapositions between the rational and psychological manifestations. The foreboding atmosphere of Usher appears at once contemporaneous to Poe’s time and yet appears to take place in another country, one with castles and gloomy, soundless landscapes. As Markman Ellis writes, “The central role occupied by the royal family in *The Castle of Otranto* establishes that the novel is located in a high social setting. But curiously, at the same time that it details the social distance of the royal world (the rulers) from the world of servants and peasants (the ruled), it simultaneously represents the royal household as a domestic family (34). When elaborating on the influence of Walpole’s novel on Poe, the context of when both authors were writing cannot be ignored.

Walpole’s novel arose during a contentious political climate in which revolution in both England and France would take place in the decade after its publication. Similarly, Poe’s work arose in the decades after the United States successful revolution and taking cues from Walpole, uses the structure of the novel to describe the anxiety of a country divorced from the old political system and yet still struggling with the implications of self-government.

Walpole's novel acted as a structure for Poe to literalize Burke's theories of the beautiful and sublime by creating conflicts of the past and present, the rational versus psychological, love and death, pain and pleasure. The Gothic novel offered a creative form recalling a past that is enacted in the present by a descent into a darkened subterranean world usually at the hands of an insane pursuer who meets his fate via a destructive climactic ending. Walpole's novel described a blueprint from which Poe creates a past that appears timeless and foreign, and yet somehow suitable to American audiences who visualized the anxiety of their age in the Gothic form. Not surprisingly, the trope introduced in *The Castle of Otranto* became an archetype of the Gothic form. The crumbling edifice of the castle resonates in Poe's works as his characters are frequently housed in castles, abbeys, chateaus and other structures at odds with the landscape in which American readers would be familiar. The baronial power of characters obsessed with retaining supremacy or satisfying an unnatural lust, usually for a heroine, shows up in Poe's work time and time again, where characters are often obsessed with exercising their power over others, sometimes coveting certain body parts or obtaining revenge for a perceived slight. While the supernatural is rarely in the form of ghosts as they appear in Walpole's novel, these elements are often encompassing parts of Poe's protagonist's inner world. Poe uses the harried sensation of Manfred's curse as an internalized sensation for his character's doomed feelings making them prisoners of their own perception. In this way, the internal terror transitions from the traditional structure of the castle—though these structures are present—to the interior psychology of these characters that create a feeling of confinement, bound not only in brick and mortar, but by memory and obsession.

Edgar Allan Poe's work constructs narratives that are concerned with merging the beautiful and the sublime. Along these lines, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and the Gothic novel offer Poe a form to frame a narrative past, creating protagonists who luxuriate in the type of sumptuous grief Burke describes—a grief that allows each protagonist to obsessively repeat or recreate trauma—until that design is overrun with terror and astonishment. Criticizing the preordained nature of Poe's work Harold Bloom writes, "No one in Poe is or can be free or wild, and some academic admirers of Poe truly like everything and everyone to be in bondage to a universal past" (1). Like Walpole's novel, the obsession of Poe's characters drives them to fates beyond reason. The events of these stories are fated because the narrative past, and often this is literally true of Poe's narrators who are telling stories retrospectively, is related through the lens of obsession that continually repeats in the protagonist's mind. If Poe's characters have a single pathology, it is the subjective world of their minds becomes preordained when it is filled only with obsession.

### **1.2.3. Henry Fuseli's visual aesthetic**

Edgar Allan Poe, among many things, is also a writer interested in visual elements. Often his stories are concerned with vision, whether it is the eyes of an antagonist or the focus on the static conclusions that often leave characters in a tableau, Poe's stories are crafted with the visual field in mind. That Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* had a great impact on Poe's visual aesthetic cannot be denied. Citing Fuseli in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe alluded to the artist as a means to describe the extremity of Roderick Usher's own paintings, writing, "By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that

mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least — in the circumstances then surrounding me — there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvass, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli” (324-325). Poe styles Usher’s paintings as more extreme than Fuseli, offering an amorphous dreadful type of painting that creates the intolerable awe which surpasses the painter. Yet the iconography of Fuseli’s most famous painting appears to echo Poe’s own notions of psychological turmoil. The narrator of “The Black Cat” makes an almost direct allusion to *The Nightmare* describing his own haunted dreams. The narrator writes, “I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight — an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off — incumbent eternally upon my heart!” (603) Ironically, Poe describes Fuseli’s *The Nightmare* in literal terms in the story, ignoring the charge of using too concrete of images which the narrator of Usher leveled at Fuseli’s style of painting. Though there are obvious connections given Poe’s consideration of Fuseli’s work, the painting’s influence goes much further than simple allusions. Fuseli’s painting inspired Poe with its dark eroticism, along with the way the canvas places the viewer inside the narrative of the painting and at a distance, a technique Poe uses in his stories.

While Henry Fuseli’s painting *The Nightmare* (1781) may have not initially been popular, it’s vivid night scene displayed psychological depth and a concentration on art as a work of the imagination rather than strict representation (Ellis 5). The nightmare encompasses a dream world simultaneously terrifying, humorous, and darkly beautiful. The victim of the nightmare is female, stretched suggestively across a bed, signifying

victimhood and a sensual power that grips the viewer with her pallor and shape. The nightmare has thrown her out of her bedclothes; her arm brushes the floor. Squatting on her abdomen is an incubus, a demonic presence that ravages a female sleeper, looking back at the viewer. Though his features are hideous with beady eyes that are all irises and dark leathery skin with pointed ears, there is a contemplative aspect to the demon that is not too far divorced from Rodin's *The Thinker*. The rationality with which the creature looks at the supine woman is juxtaposed by the horse who glares with a comical and yet terrifying expression. Along with the iconography of the horse and the incubus is the erotic pitch of the woman's body. The incubus standing directly on the woman's abdomen suggests a demonic fertility that is emphasized by the eroticism of her gaping night gown and the exaggerated expression on her face that describes pleasure or horror.

The tableau of the painting is an incursion. Similar to the incubus and the mare, the viewer trespasses in the woman's bedroom, a place of erotic tension, along with a deeper intrusion into her subconscious. As Markman Ellis writes, "[T]he painting represents a nightmare, but it does so in a curious way, depicting it as both a dream image and the image of a dream. It represents a moment of terror: at one level it depicts the effect of a nightmare on a sleeping woman (an empirical observation); but at another level, it seeks to represent to us the disturbed sleeper's mind (a symbolic portrayal of the nightmare). Fuseli's hybrid style, mixing innovation and tradition, was described by Peter Tomory as a Germanic '*Schwarzkunststudie*' or 'moment of terror' painting" (5). Indeed, the imagery of *The Nightmare* appears in many Poe stories with the interior chambers

cloaked with curtains or tapestries, the pale nigh unto death heroine, and the bottle of opiates close by suggesting a death-like sleep or a chemical induced fever dream.

This moment of terror represented in realistic detail or ‘the presentation of a dream image and image of a dream’ that most often appears in Poe’s stories. As Ellis writes, “Fuseli’s naturalistic painting technique, felicitously recording the detail of objects and figures, can be initially equated with a novelized variety of realism” (5). Poe also uses the protagonists of his tales as ways to bring the reader inside the events of the narrative and allowing them to verge outside to something that, like Fuseli’s painting, allows both an interior and exterior position. In Harriet Hustis’ essay “The Gothic of Reading and Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” she writes, “his [Poe’s] dual critique and enactment of the Gothic in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ represent an exploration of the very nature of Gothic textuality itself and its effects (both aesthetic and psychic) on the reader” (116). In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe creates a story in which the reader identifies with the narrator while also linking the narrative to Gothic tropes of the baronial house and supernatural elements. Even in Poe’s less Gothic stories, the reader identifies with a narrator while connecting them to the artifice of the story. A story like Poe’s “How to Write a Blackwood Article” plays off the notion of reader expectations to deliver a wry take down of editors who favor style over substance and writer’s obsequiousness to formulas rather than artistic expression.

The story is broken into two parts. The second part presents the literary work entitled “The Predicament” written by the protagonist based on a list of rules about how to write a Blackwood article. The reader is given access to the specifications of a sensational article in the first part of the story as the ridiculous protagonist, Psyche

Zenobia, is taught by the Blackwood editor how to write for the magazine. The second section of the story is the narrative Psyche writes in which she applies these lessons in strange ways which constantly subvert the reader's expectations. During the conclusion of the story, Psyche, who assures the reader that her first name "is good Greek, and means 'the soul'" gets her head trapped in the aperture of a clock and has it cut off by the gigantic hands. With her head cut off Psyche quips, "My senses were here and there at one and the same moment. With my head I imagined, at one time, that I, the head, was the real Signora Psyche Zenobia — at another I felt convinced that myself, the body, was the proper identity" (295). Here Poe reveals the full comic intent of the story, describing how the head or soul and the body could be separated and asking exactly which one— the soul or the body— is the actual identity of Psyche Zenobia. The satire exposes its intentions to the reader if not the protagonist and yet revealing the strings of the puppet, the narrative still works as a story of sensations. By revealing how the story works narratively, Poe manipulates the reader further, surprising them with dark laughter of inverting Blackwood's rules, but also revealing depth beyond Psyche Zenobia, the story's author that can only be glimpsed by the reader.

Markman Ellis describes a similar playfulness in Fuseli's painting. Ellis interprets the position of the horse in the painting, "The figure of the horse then is a pun or joke on the title of the painting as a whole: a literalism that disturbs the topic more than centers it. The Nightmare offers a telling example of how the Gothic articulates unstated or inexpressible themes in excessively ornate rhetorical gestures, such as puns or jokes" (8). The impish sense of humor, of illustrating a black or dark mare in a painting entitled *The Nightmare*, is similar to the type of humor found in Poe's stories. As Ellis suggests,



humor is meant to disarm and ultimately unnerve the viewer or reader in the case of Poe. While it's easy to draw comparisons between Fuseli's iconography in the painting and Poe's iconography in his stories written decades later, the rhetorical gestures of both works and the dual vantage of keeping the reader or viewer at a distance and yet affecting his or her senses illustrates how influential *The Nightmare* was on Poe's work.

Like Fuseli's painting which asks the viewer to be outside and inside the nightmare, Poe asks the reader to identify with obsessive characters and yet exist in an outside position that understands the artifice of the story. This juxtaposition, much like his protagonist in "How to Write a Blackwood Article," leaves the reader both in a mental and physical space. The interior and exterior position allows for a clash that echoes the conflict between enlightenment and romantic thought. The aesthetic concept of Burke's sublime and beautiful, the narrative past of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, along with the psychological and meta-critical elements of Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* allow us to describe some of the major formalized elements of Poe's work.

### **1.3. The American Gothic**

While the Gothic novel originated with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, many political and social forces were inherent in the creation of the genre. The Gothic form was built on revolutions, whether the French Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or the American Revolution in the American Gothic or in the case of Southern Gothic, the Civil War. This section delineates Poe's place in the American Gothic tradition and introduces how the grotesque aligns with his aesthetic.

The Gothic has always preceded or been contiguous with social and political upheaval. What the genre represents is a space where sins of the past bubble to the

surface, haunting the protagonists housed in a castle or abbey and showing the basic structures as symbolized by these great houses are corrupt. In *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and The Culture of Gothic*, Mark Edmundson defines the genre: “Gothic shows the dark side, the world of cruelty, lust, perversion, and crime that, many of us at least half believe, is hidden beneath established conventions. Gothic tears through censorship, explodes hypocrisies, to expose the world as the corrupted, reeking place it is—or so its proponents maintain” (4). The shearing away of these conventions are the basic emphasis of the Gothic, describing a world that is compromised by historical and personal sin of which no one can escape.

While the American Gothic form that Edgar Allan Poe was writing differed in many ways from its 18<sup>th</sup> century variants exemplified by Horace Walpole and other quintessential Gothic writers like Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis, the essential element of an inescapable, personal sin remains. The European Gothic emphasized the architecture of deserted castles and abbeys as a symbol for dissolving political structure, but the American Gothic had very few structures to invest with inherited sin. The Gothic castle had no place in the American landscape; save for the notable exceptions like *St. Herbert*. Gothic space of a very different kind became important. Charles Brockden Brown writes in the introduction to his novel *Edgar Huntly*, “Puerile superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness, are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these would admit of no apology” (1-2). As Brown suggests, the space populated by Gothic terrors became the wilderness. Many characters descend into a wild place filled with “savages” and wild

animals like bears and panthers symbolizing the chaos of unpopulated land. The fear of space unstructured by laws or sovereignty dovetails with the paranoia of a society whose direction was ostensibly guided by a democratic majority. Often these stories are dream-like with protagonist's sleepwalking, hearing voices, or performing actions they are helpless to resist. The concerns of the early American Gothic become the regulation of both political and corporeal bodies. Many novels around this time begin taking the names of their protagonist/antagonist like *Edgar Huntly* and *St. Herbert* as the title, showing a preoccupation with the individual in an unregulated wilderness.

While predecessors of Poe such as Charles Brockden Brown and contemporaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, often used the wilderness as a metaphor for a structure unmediated by law or morality, Poe shifted the focus into the internal forces within the individual. The structure Poe describes was no longer architecture, but the edifice of the mind. Elucidating Poe's difference from his predecessors, Mark Edmundson writes that "Poe is in many ways the inheritor of Radcliffe and Lewis; like them he discloses a haunted world. But Poe's Gothic mode is also strikingly different from that of his English predecessors: his is more inward, less socially created, more nightmarish. And Poe's Gothic is without escape" (71). Poe's Gothic stories do not take place in the world, but in the mind which is sometimes unreliable and often irrational. The slippery place of the mind is another unstructured space, unlike the wilderness of Brown or Hawthorne, the danger is interior and this space is frequently mediated by the irrational and obsessive, not the moral or legal restrictions of society. Mark Edmundson, quoting Harold Bloom, emphasizes the lack of freedom Poe's internal space allows for his characters. Edmundson explains, "Harold Bloom observed that 'self-reliance, the Emersonian

answer to Original Sin, does not exist in the Poe cosmos, where you necessarily start out damned, doomed and dismal.’ And stay that way, one might add. In Poe...the past rises up to devour any attempt to begin anew: the present is fully possessed by long-ago traumas” (71). Edmundson and Bloom emphasize the inability to be free of trauma. For Poe’s characters, obsession becomes a need to relive trauma again and again. Trauma becomes circular and inevitable. As Bloom describes, Poe’s sense of the Gothic was played in opposition to Emerson and the Transcendentalist emphasis on freedom and the inherent goodness of people who are ‘self-reliant’ and not dependent on institutions.

Poe bristled at this philosophy, and fashioned his Gothic aesthetic as a challenge to the philosophy of self-reliance. By creating characters reliant only on their thoughts to manufacture reality and who are cloistered in this interior space, Poe takes an extreme position on the divinity of the individual, creating characters whose obsessions are their philosophies and hence their actions lead to gruesome and shocking acts of irrationality. The falling structures in Poe are not merely architectural or metaphorical, but the collapse of the notion of rationality. If the individual is divine, he or she is also demonic; if an individual is rational, he or she are also obsessive, murderous, and psychotic. Poe exposes the reader to indeterminacy. This concept is best expressed in Edmund Burke’s comments about the combination of beauty and the sublime. Burke writes:

If the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are sometimes found united, does this prove, that they are the same, does it prove, that they are any way allied, does it prove even that they are not opposite and contradictory? Black and white may soften, may blend, but they are not therefore the same. Nor when they are so softened and blended

with each other, or with the different colours, is the power of black as black, or of white as white, so strong as when each stands uniform and distinguished. (114)

While Burke is explicating how an object can have beautiful and sublime elements, the implication of an art object that is neither sublime nor beautiful but an indeterminate mixture of the two categories is Poe's aesthetic goal. Poe's fictive structures harken back to Walpole's Gothic novel, transplanting his characters in a vaguely archaic time period at once unfamiliar and eerily contemporaneous. What Walpole does with the sensation of time, Poe does with his aesthetic. Similar to Burke's description of how an artifact can be simultaneously beautiful and sublime, Poe creates stories built on binaries, the past versus the present, the rational versus the irrational. Through these binaries he creates a kaleidoscope of effects, giving the resulting fiction many conflicting sensations without emphasizing the predominance of a single element. While the Gothic tradition may be the box in which Poe places his dark gifts, these confines are never definitive and the effects created in these strange tales are diffuse and elusive.

#### **1.4. Grotesque as Aesthetic**

The way Poe fulfills Burke's notions of the sublime and beautiful is by creating a Gothic structure that visualizes the narrative world via a grotesque aesthetic. The grotesque as a visual aesthetic illustrates the indeterminate. The Gothic is often aligned with the grotesque, too, as both describe order collapsing into chaos. Unlike the Gothic, the grotesque is not concerned with establishing order but actually throwing the narrative world out of equilibrium. Poe uses Gothic structures to create an unidentified past, symbolic of the dark ancestral legacy of sin, yet does not reestablish order at the

conclusion of these fictions. Instead, his stories halt the narrative at the apex of terror. This indeterminacy creates a sense of astonishment in the protagonist and the reader. The grotesque is a term that has many variants; the most familiar trait in these definitions is the tension between the structured world and the distorted, disjointed, or hybrid elements that shatter that sense of order. This section defines the grotesque in critical discourse, describing its connection to the Gothic, generally and Poe, specifically.

The literary grotesque invites readers into a familiar world of the narrative only to shift the perspective upending the reader's passive acceptance of the realistic world and shattering that perspective. Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque in the act of mediation. Kayser's book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* traces the history of the term starting with the term's origin as a visual concept and describing its transformation into a literary term. Kayser's definition of the grotesque is one meant to generate a definition beyond the historical nature of the term. Kayser frames the grotesque as an aesthetic. Kayser writes, "That the word 'grotesque' applies to three different realms—the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception—is significant and appropriate as an indication that it has the makings of a basic esthetic category" (180). These categories approach the grotesque as something created through the mediation between the work of art, the reader or viewer and the actual reception of the work by the public. Kayser warns, however, not to judge what is the grotesque simply by what appears to be strange or distorted to us. Our own viewpoints may be biased and what seems strange to us may have a logical explanation or cultural significance for others. Therefore, the grotesque cannot be judged simply by its effect on the reader.

The only way to truly judge what is grotesque comes from the work meeting basic tenets of the form, the monstrous, distorted, and the asymmetrical, and how these definitive attributes are received by readers. Kayser writes, “prolonged interest in the works of art themselves helps us to develop a greater ability to judge them” (181). Inherent in the discovery of what is indeed grotesque is a loose categorization of the attributes of what can encompass the category. Revealing the three aspects of the grotesque as an aesthetic, Kayser defines the word by what exactly the grotesque does. Kayser explains, “The grotesque is a structure. Its nature could be summed up in a phrase that has repeatedly suggested itself to us: THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD” (184). Kayser’s idea of the estranged implies a psychological unknown. What Sigmund Freud called the “uncanny” or what Edwards and Graulund in the book *Grotesque* describe as, “The experience of something being both foreign and familiar engenders the emotive responses of discomfort and alienation” (5). Kayser reads the grotesque in psychological terms, emphasizing the concept of estrangement as a kind of unknown self that becomes embodied in the literary form as a narrative world in which the protagonist is both familiar and which gradually becomes distorted and chaotic.

As readers, the grotesque shocks us with the unreliability of our world and, as Kayser writes, “We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death” (185). The inability for the world’s structure to adhere brings the reader into a world of chaos. In Kayser’s argument he makes a specific demarcation between what is considered the tragic and the grotesque. The grotesque is not a failure of moral order or an individual act, but rather the inability

for the protagonist/reader to orient ourselves in the physical universe (185). The inability to orient ourselves in the physical universe then leads to the feeling of alienation. This estrangement does not come with a specific moral like the tragic. Once a lesson has been attached to the grotesque it transforms into satire, and the chaos of failing structure has been shown to really have been a means to impart a specific meaning or lesson. The inability to garner any meaning from the failing structure leaves us fearful and questioning not only our existence, but if the world can be judged by our sense of rational thought.

In his book *The Grotesque*, Philip Thomson views the grotesque as place where the absurd and horrific meet, but which neither have predominance over the other. Thomson defines the grotesque as “the unresolved clash of incompatibles (in work and response),” adding as a secondary definition the “ambivalently abnormal” (27). The grotesque is based on emotional response by the reader to these clashing incompatibilities, and it is in these divergent emotional states that the reader finds alienation or ambivalence. The presence of the “laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable” is the encounter of separate sensations that seemingly mitigate one another, providing a humor whose absurdity is dimmed by the horror of what is transpiring. And yet, the horror is not an all-encompassing terror because of the strange humor of the situation. These diametrically opposed sensations are only rendered truly grotesque when they are described in terms that are realistic and visceral in the world of the narrative. Therefore, the grotesque is both a representative of the absurd and the horrific shaped by the author’s representation of them as existing in a rational narrative world. The absurd can also be seen as more of a device. Thomson notes this



difference by observing that “there is no formal pattern, no structural characteristics peculiar to the absurd: it can only be perceived as content, as a quality, a feeling or atmosphere, an attitude or world-view” (32). Only in conjunction with the horrific does the absurd become particularly grotesque. The marked incompatibilities modulated into the disconsolate sensation create the grotesque aesthetic. The satirical is meant to convey right and wrong and instruct the reader and thus, the moment that lesson is imparted the narrative becomes a satire and not grotesque.

Thomson breaks the grotesque into parts that are meant to emphasize the collective effects on the reader. Here he describes the calibrated effect of alienation as “the flinging together of disparate and irreconcilable things, which by themselves would arouse no curiosity,” which together make the familiar appear to be off-kilter and strange (59). He also cites the psychological effect of the grotesque, which both horrifies the reader but undercuts that horror with humor or absurdity. The humor is not free but is adulterated with horror creating an effect of both horrifying and amusing the reader. While the grotesque is both playful and horrifying, its lack of resolution doesn’t allow the reader the comfort of placing what they’ve read in any given context. The grotesque for Thomson then is a series of conflicting sensations that create alienation in the familiar by offering readers variants of both the horrific and the absurd. Put another way, the grotesque is predicated on very intricate oppositions that come to no definite resolution.

For Kayser and Thomson, the effect is a vitally important aspect of the grotesque. Wolfgang Kayser interprets the grotesque as a deliberate aesthetic, one in which alienation in the familiar and absurdity and horror are the guiding elements. Thomson, like Kayser, views the grotesque as a specific configuration of elements meant to conjure

a psychological discomfort in the reader. The commonality these definitions share is that the grotesque is about both human's need to create structure and the fear of how those structures may fail. The grotesque's whirlpool of chaos, alienation, absurdity, and monstrosity create an eerie sensation of elliptical despair that is particularly complex and for Thomson, particularly literary. What all these definitions emphasize is a creative aesthetic in which a series of binaries exist at the same time. The grotesque then is a term that is historical and metaphorical, defining existential wonder and despair, dread and pain, the alienated and the familiar, and the past and future.

### **1.5. Gothic Structure and Grotesque Aesthetic**

No genre has been more aligned with the grotesque than the Gothic. Often the Gothic is linked and sometimes mistaken for the grotesque. While the two often work in tandem, not every work that is Gothic is grotesque and not everything that is grotesque is Gothic. The mistake is understandable. The Gothic is about the falling of established orders which is perfectly encompassed by the symbol of rotting castles and dilapidated abbeys, but this personification is perhaps a key difference between the Gothic and grotesque. The grotesque creates a distorted reality, one that does not cohere to the rational world and thus leaves the reader feeling conflicted about the terror and absurdity of a previously familiar world. These twin sensations, not doubt, can be experienced in the Gothic, but are often answered with a reinstatement of order, the revealing of secrets, the justice of revenge or another circumstance of plot that readjusts the narrative and the reader to the new reality. In "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" Alan Spiegel delineates between the Gothic and grotesque:

[T]he Gothic hero is an aggressive, Promethean figure, a rebel, whose reaction to the Establishment is one of total rejection. The grotesque is a passive victim, a scapegoat, whose reaction to the Establishment is never one of rejection, but one either of anguish or ineffectual criticism. It is the Gothic hero who rejects; it is the grotesque who is rejected. The former inspires our terror and admiration; the latter our pity and compassion. Finally, the Gothic novel employed methods of story that were best suited to the dream which it wished to represent. These methods veered towards the melodramatic and the typological, the projective and the hyperbolic, as opposed to the of the eighteenth century realistic novel which tended the mimetic and the historical, the analytic (Spiegel 433-434).

Spiegel's definition offers an interesting juxtaposition of how these two differing concepts can be activated in the same work. An essential part of the Gothic framework is the slave/master idea, one in which the protagonist, usually a hero/villain seeks to enslave or possess some obsessive element, usually this is the virginity of a heroine which appears to be a way to solidify power either physically or by possessing something that will allow for the hero/villain's continued dominance. The Gothic and the grotesque are two strands of these assigned positions. As Spiegel writes, the Gothic figure rejects society, casting about for a type of self-actualization that annihilates the object the hero/villain's obsession or whichever character gets in his way. The grotesque character is the distorted, irrational exemplar of this rejection and in some cases, acts as slave figure. The Gothic and the grotesque react in this way, constantly showing a landscape in which the master of the Gothic figure subjugates the slave of the grotesque figure.

The second chapter of this thesis offers a longer examination of how Poe's grotesque aesthetic fulfills the principles alluded to by Burke of creating an artistic work that is neither totally beautiful or sublime, a work that strikes the reader with its dichotomy of conflicting elements, bringing the narrative into a place of astonishment. Poe's use of the grotesque aesthetic allows him to create the alien in the familiar, fashioning stories that are indeterminate yet encompass a beautiful, astonishing terror that come to epitomize a powerful facet of the American Gothic.

## CHAPTER 2: EDGAR ALLAN POE'S GROTESQUE AESTHETIC

### 2.1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's work has influenced writers as diverse as Charles Baudelaire, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Richard Wright; however, Poe's popularity in his own time was fleeting. In the years after his death, Poe's work was largely ignored by critics and readers alike only to be rediscovered and hailed by the French Symbolists—Baudelaire, Paul Valéry, and Stéphane Mallarmé. This chapter begins with an overview of the historical moment in which Poe wrote, focusing on his outsider status in the publishing industry in the United States that defined Poe's career as a writer and magazine editor. This description of Poe's context explains the literary and political currents Poe was writing against, illustrating how the grotesque offered him both an artistic avenue to satisfy his own aesthetic goals and a philosophical means to question American exceptionalism.

The second part of the chapter offers a textual analysis explicating Poe's application of a grotesque aesthetic in his own work. Poe's hyperbolic endings generate a kind of static combustion, concluding at the height of the action, as the protagonist discovers a dark secret about himself that is punctuated by physical horror. By identifying the reader with this protagonist, often by using first-person narration, Poe implicates the reader in a terror that is suspended in a tableau. This tableau is crafted through the obsessive design of spaces and objects, creating an indeterminate effect within his stories that the reader *feels* as much as visualizes through Poe's written descriptions. I describe this feeling as the haptic, rather than exclusively visual, space of the story. The

combination of these three elements--the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space--make up Poe's grotesque aesthetic.

## 2.2. Poe's Context

Poe's writing career began as books became more accessible to Americans and the concept of authorship was changing drastically. Gone was the system of patronage, where writing a book meant doing so for a single individual of means and standing. Along with the economy of the United States, American authorship was transforming into a market system in which the author was represented as both a single individual producing works and the summation of those works, namely their economic effect on the market. J. Gerald Kennedy quoting Martha Woodmansee describes this changing notion of authorship. Kennedy writes "Romantic conceptions of the divine or artistic inspiration—within an emerging, Romantic conception of the poet or novelist as one who displays original genius by creating 'something utterly new, unprecedented.' By ascribing texts to a writer's own genius,' readers and critic 'transform the writer into a unique individual uniquely responsible for a unique product'" (14). Authors were the creator of their fiction and also the purveyor of the myth of their own genius, an early form of marketing which added legitimacy to a profession that was viewed as troubling at its best and immoral at its worst. With this shift in authorial identity, technological advances which provided cheaper paper along with more efficient forms of transportation gave Americans greater access to magazines and books. With these technological changes came a critical emphasis on the significance of what American's read and how these books affected citizens, especially women, in the new republic. Novels such as William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) and Tabitha Gillman Tenney's *Female*

*Quixotism* (1801) focus on women readers who were unable to differentiate the fictive world of romance novels from reality. Along with these works, books such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) a narrative focusing on an individual who misinterprets a conman's trick and believes a deity is ordering him to murder others were published. The impetus of Brown's narrative shows a preoccupation with how events are interpreted by individuals. These initial forays into America's dark imagination describe an abiding interest in how narratives work and the affective experience of the reader.

Poe's career began working in magazines, a relatively new industry that thrived as the country's economy shifted towards industrial city centers. As cities became more populated, magazines, more economical than books, published stories and reviews as popular sources of entertainment. Working as an editor as well as contributing book reviews and fiction to various magazines, Poe never focused exclusively on publishing his fiction in book form. Rather, Poe's goal was creating a magazine that featured what he considered true American literature, one free of "puffery" or the inflated reviews of American writers by reviewers unwilling to criticize them. In a review of two books of poetry by Americans Drake and Halleck Poe outlines this bias:

[W]e get up a hue and cry about the necessity of encouraging native writers of merit — we blindly fancy that we can accomplish this by indiscriminate puffing of good, bad, and indifferent, without taking the trouble to consider that what we choose to denominate encouragement is thus, by its general application, rendered precisely the reverse. In a word, so far from being ashamed of the many disgraceful literary failures to which our own inordinate vanities and misapplied patriotism have lately given birth, and so far from deeply lamenting that these daily puerilities are of home manufacture, we

adhere pertinaciously to our original blindly conceived idea, and thus often find ourselves involved in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American. (Critical Notices Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore website)

Poe's review illustrates the acerbic nature of his criticism and the underlying effect of what he considered a northern bias focused more on patriotism than literary quality. That being said, Poe's review also describes the style of acerbic mockery that his critical writing became infamous for, earning him the nickname The Tomahawk.

Surrounding Poe's work as an editor and writer for magazines was the continual consideration what American literature was supposed to be and what it was supposed to provide. This emphasis directly affected Poe's own view on the nature of writing. While most American authors were concerned with didacticism, Poe was less interested in imparting a moral lesson and more concerned with how intricately calibrated fiction could produce sensations within the reader. Poe's grotesque aesthetic means to do the opposite of didacticism, meaning to show the indeterminate or the paradoxical, creating sensations within his stories with no strict social or religious connotation.

While Edgar Allan Poe's own particular aesthetic choices set him apart from other American writers, his status as a self-identified southerner also marked him as an outsider in the publishing industry. The publishing industry during Poe's time was based in several key cities: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Virginia. These publishing centers were widely separated from the rest of the country and thus, unlike England where London was the hub of publishing or France where Paris was a central location; America's publishing industry were centered mostly in northeastern part of the country. Poe bristled at the overwhelming influence of New England writers generally and the



transcendentalist movement and Emerson, specifically. Poe found these exclusionary practices in the financing for magazines, the celebration of authors like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the sometimes exclusionary collections of America's 'best writers' published by editors like Rufus Wilmont Griswold, who, following Poe's death, did irreparable harm to his literary and personal reputation by creating the myth of the author as a hater of humanity and a drunken madman.

Poe's constant feelings of being an outsider in the publishing industry also coincided with the presidency of Andrew Jackson, which is also part of the cultural context informing Poe's aesthetic. In *Perverting the American Renaissance*, Betsy Erkkila describes how Poe's early collections of poems define an art style set directly against the political backdrop of Jacksonian democracy. Erkkila writes "[Poe's early poems] which were published during the years when Andrew Jackson came to power bearing a public rhetoric (if not reality) of democracy and the common man and an aggressive nationalist vision of westward expansion and empire, Poe set himself against the rising tide of democracy by defining a fundamentally conservative set of aesthetic and cultural values" (71). These values as Erkkila continues are "the values of poetry, beauty, and the heart against the debased and primarily didactic imperatives of the literary public sphere" (71). Both the didactic novels Poe read in early American fiction and the worship of the common man act as the antithesis for Poe's poetry and fiction and offers keen insight into his particular form of the grotesque.

Poe's formation of the grotesque brings many of these cultural factors to light in his short fiction. The aesthetic which appears in his stories are concerned with

exceptional individuals, acting as a critique of Emerson's idea of the divinity of man and the Jacksonian ideal of the common man. Poe doesn't view divinity in the perception of men, but destruction. The Emersonian idea of self-reliance devolves in Poe's view to unfettered individual criminality. The concept of the common man, as some divine apparatus meant to exemplify the cultural obsession of land attainment and the extermination of Native Americans or John Winthrop's notion of "the city upon a hill," which situated the United States as a shiny exemplar of Christian values, is the anathema of the individuals in Poe's stories.

### **2.3. Beauty and the Grotesque**

Poe's protagonists are artists, often creating singular forms whether architectural construction, interior design, or simply creating music and painting. While these forms differ story to story, each character creates a beautiful object, space, or mechanism which is rooted in the trauma of sorrow and loss. As Edmund Burke indicated there is such a thing as pleasurable grief, one created by repetition. Poe's construction of this type of beautiful object also harkens back to Burke's notion that an object can be both beautiful and sublime. While Burke indicates that one always overpowers the other in effect, Poe's mission is to create a beautiful and sublime sensation that is neither one category nor the other, but that leaves the reader locked in an indeterminate space.

Perhaps the best way to introduce this mission is to analyze this effect through the lens of Poe's most famous poem "The Raven" and his aesthetic manifesto "The Philosophy of Composition," which purports to explain the construction of the poem. Harold Bloom writes "Poe...is our hysteria, our uncanny unanimity in our repressions" (Bloom 1). Poe's representations of hysteria are leavened with an apprehensive beauty, a

gross horror that through its distortions creates a terrain both human and otherworldly. While Poe may be an artist particularly skilled at psychological revelation, his depiction of the individual in self-opposition illustrates how constructed the notion of a society of individuals can be. If Poe's characters exemplify our nation's hysteria, his fiction also shows what flimsy material that reality is constructed on.

Analyzing "The Raven," Barbara Johnson considers how Poe's view of traumatic beauty registers in the content and the structure of the poem. Noting Poe's edict in "The Philosophy of Composition" "that pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating and the most pure is... found in the contemplation of the beautiful," Barbara Johnson writes, "The nature of the pleasure in question however, is... pushed to the edge of trauma: dead women, mad mothers, idiot boys, lugubrious birds" (14). Johnson emphasizes Poe's concept that the beautiful must leave a mark in order to span outside its visual or aural field. The effect of Poe's beautiful is to leave an abiding uneasiness in the reader. Recalling Burke's aesthetic theories of the beautiful and the sublime, Poe's poem captures what Burke calls the pleasures of grief. Burke writes, "It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all circumstances that attend it, even to the last minuteness; to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each, and to find a thousand new perfections in all, that were not sufficiently understood before; in grief, the pleasure is still uppermost" (458). Burke's concept of pleasurable grief is a key component to much of Poe's work which often focuses on perversity or the urge to bring oneself pain. Poe connects perversity with the desire to repeat a pleasurable kind of grief, marking an aesthetic that equalizes the

beautiful and the sublime. This constant repetition allows Poe's protagonists to be terrified by trauma and yet obsessed with the pleasure of reliving it.

"The Raven" is a study of Burke's concept of repeating pleasurable grief both in form and content. Johnson notes the duplicitous aesthetic in Poe's description which makes the poem an artifact that creates this idea of grief and yet implicates the reader in an interesting way. Johnson writes, "Poe is writing a highly artificial poem that describes the signifier as an artifice that somehow captures the genuine. Yet generations of American readers have responded to it backwards: rejecting it for the artifice its own genuineness is demystifying. It cannot communicate its insight about how poems work if it does not work as a poem. Yet if the poem worked better, it would not carry the insight it carries" (24). The paradoxical nature of the verse creates a form in which the beauty of the poem is its own construction; the reader is both repulsed by the transparency of the poem as a creation and yet entranced by the repetition of the rhyme scheme. Poe creates a call and response rhyme scheme that gives the poem a musical effect, a quality that embellishes Edmund Burke's notion of an enjoyable grief. The splendor comes with the caged repetition that keeps the reader moored to the inevitability of the bird's response. The narrator's grief cannot fly outside the strictures of a repeating mechanism of the poem. Made worse is the narrator's inability to end his grieving which is emphasized by the nonsense response of the universe placed in the beak of the raven who dumbly repeats a single word.

The poem troubles the rational mind of the narrator and reader alike by creating an appealing logic and somehow grasping at a deeper spiritual meaning. Though Poe's goal is to create the beautiful, the poem is constructed rationally with knowledge of how

a precise rhythm scheme or word choice elicits this particular effect. Part of the narrator's struggle is remembering the 'days of yore' versus his current reality but there is also a hint of the wished for scenario of Lenore coming back to the narrator whether that is being reunited in the afterlife or the insinuation of the unknown stranger knocking on the chamber door. Obviously this is irrational, yet the logic of the verse and the absurdity of the raven allow the reader to glimpse in the narrator's thoughts a world in which this supernatural reunion is possible.

Poe's beautiful cage of a poem allows the narrator the remembrance of freedom without the possibility of achieving it. Using Burke's notion of pleasurable grief, Poe's creates a poem that mimics the emotion while also setting the reader outside of the structure of the verse, allowing them both an interior and exterior place in the work, similar to Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* which implicates the viewer as a participant in the scene while also observing the painting from an aesthetic distance. The grand palaces of Poe's art—the deteriorating mansions, the machinery, and the rooms cloaked with physical dressings of the dark and supernatural— are a grotesque art. While this thesis is more concerned with Poe's short fiction, the creation of his most famous poem allows us to see the intricate clockwork of effects in which he writes and how those effects are specifically grotesque. The poem with its subject matter, heightened language, content, and rhyme scheme illustrates Poe's concept of beauty as a category that is laden with sublime or terrifying elements. Poe uses the grotesque to create what Burke describes as the mixture of the sublime and beautiful.

Using the metaphor of black and white to describe the two aesthetics, Burke writes, "Black and white may soften, may blend, but they are not therefore the same. Nor

when they are so softened and blended with each other, or with the different colours, is the power of black as black, or of white as white, so strong as when each stands uniform and distinguished (114). Poe creates an aesthetic that adulterates the beautiful and the sublime into a singular indeterminate aesthetic. “The Raven” allows us to view these elements in much starker terms because the poetic form creates an interesting position for the reader who is drawn to the tonality of the piece as much as the intricacies of narrative. While the poem undergirds Poe’s concept of the beautiful as something freighted with terror, his short stories offer a very different example of the grotesque. Poe ends “The Raven” on a lugubrious note, one that indicates the narrator is haunted by a repeating trauma. However, Poe’s short stories take on a much more ferocious tenor. Murder, madness, and mayhem, all abound at the conclusions of Poe’s tales. These narratives often end as the narrator’s obsession drives him from rationality to chaos. Poe is interested in showing a world that is thrown into paradox. The next section will discuss how Poe’s grotesque aesthetic manifests in several of his stories through the application of three elements: the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space.

#### **2.4. Three Elements of Poe’s Grotesque Aesthetic**

Burke’s theory of the sublime and the beautiful infiltrates Poe’s short fiction in fundamental ways. Poe creates a fiction that is a mixture of the beautiful and the sublime without one category sublimating the other. It is the complex combination of these categories that gives Poe’s stories the sensation of indeterminacy. However, the way Poe creates these sensations is through the grotesque aesthetic. Using the three elements that make up his grotesque aesthetic-- the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space--Poe builds a narrative world that is halted in a moment of astonishment, caught between

order and chaos, the beautiful and the sublime. The rest of this chapter will define and describe three elements that encompass Edgar Allan Poe's grotesque aesthetic.

#### **2.4.1. The affective reader**

The place of the reader is an important position in Poe's stories. Poe asks the reader both to identify with the first-person narrator, while also placing the reader in a position where they must interpret Gothic tropes and intertextual materials. This tension between identification and interpretation leaves the reader stranded in a sensation of sublime, bodily terror. This sensation for the reader is affective, creating an emotional response through the process of reading the story. Through the idea of an affective reader, one that closely identifies with the protagonist in the tale and one that holds a position outside the narrative, Poe actively creates a feeling of indeterminacy.

An example of the affective reader can be found in one of Poe's lesser known works, a parody of *A Thousand and One Nights* titled "The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade" purports to tell the story that eventually got Scheherazade killed, damning her to a fate she spent the preceding thousand and one tales forestalling. Scheherazade tells the king stories about an increasingly grotesque lands that have an "atmosphere so dense as to sustain iron or steel, just as our own does feather" or lands that "were crowned with ever-blossoming trees and perpetual sweet-scented flowers, that made the whole territory one gorgeous garden; but the name of this luxuriant land was the Kingdom of Horror, and to enter it was inevitable death" or a district "with vegetables that grew not upon any soil but in the air (797). While Scheherazade tells these stories, the king becomes more visibly disgusted, eventually stopping her and deciding these grotesque landscapes are so repulsive, Scheherazade deserves to die. While the story is a

pastiche of *The Thousand and One Nights* and a commentary about a writer knowing his or her audience, the tale describes the grotesque scenes as a means to trouble, inadvertently in the case of the story, the reader. Poe's tales and stories are hyperbolic and their constructions are meant to dissolve the membrane between the protagonist and the reader. Poe does this by creating a meta-narrative or texts within the story which produce an echoing, distorting effect allowing the reader to closely identify with the protagonist on the bodily level and yet situating the reader outside the text as a consumer of Gothic tropes.

While imagery or descriptive evocation works at unsettling the affective reader, Poe's fascination with reading and the reader emphasize the grotesque as something both external and internal. Going by the definition of the familiar that is suddenly alien, Poe uses the place of the reader to internalize the narrative, collapsing the external and internal. By stranding the reader between the interpretation of intertextual materials and identification with the protagonist, Poe collapses the external world of affect and the interior meditative space of the reader. Throughout Poe's work, protagonists take refuge in libraries; most famously, his detective Dupin secretes himself away in a book closet, while Egæus the narrator of "Bernice" spends the great majority of the story in reflection among the volumes in his ancestral library. While the library acts as an emblem for the internal and external, the role of intertextual elements within the story, meaning missives, poems, or stories read by the characters create a very specific effect that moves beyond the space of the library.

An essential part of Poe's grotesque is these narrative elements that create an abiding sense of dread or a propulsive fear. This sensation of dread creates a fearful



atmosphere that permeates the narrative driving it towards a conclusion that at once appears fated and yet, still leaves the reader astonished. Stoking these fires of dread and menace these narratives add to the growing turbulence of the story creating a liminal space in which the protagonist and the reader coalesce. An example of this can be seen in Roderick Usher's poem in "The Fall of the House of Usher" which mirrors the story of baronial collapse that is the narrative of Usher's fall. By including the "The Haunted Palace," the narrator along with the reader is exposed to an exceedingly supernatural vision of structure falling away. The concluding lines explain how the story will leave the reader. Roderick writes:

VI.

And travellers now within that valley,  
Through the red-litten 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. (327)

The poem allows the reader to infer Usher's mental status, while assuming an almost mystical foreshadowing of events to come through the elevated style of Usher's poetics. After all, we are travelers in this strange country, listening to the discordant melodies of Usher's audacious creations and yet somehow like the narrator joining in these designs, being drawn into the fantastical nature of the environment of the castle.

Ironically, the final lines of the poem emphasize the reader's place in the story.

Assuming the identity of the narrator, the reader rushes out of the house beset by the conflicting sensations of absurdity and terror. Charged with the grotesque absurdity of the story, the strangeness of the man who believes the house is sentient and the dire ending of the last conflagration, Usher describes the inner turmoil of the absurd and doomed house, yet echoes with the destruction to come. John H. Timmerman notes, “‘The Haunted Palace’ provides another artistic mirror image. The work precisely traces the devolution of the House of Usher from a palace governed in orderly fashion...to a den of disorder in which demons flicker about like bats—except that these demons are in Usher’s mind...With the demise of some structured order, art forms rampage in dissonance and cacophony” (Bloom 174). The poem acts as clarion call, infecting the story with Usher’s own psychosis. Juxtaposing C. Auguste Dupin’s clinical thoroughness which is emphasized in the rational structure of Poe’s detective tales, the poem evokes the chaos of Usher’s mind while also distorting the hyperbolic events of the story’s conclusion, creating a place where the mental and physical inhabit the same space.

While Usher’s poem acts as a catalyst for the flurry of destructive events describing how rationality falls to chaos, the poem in “Ligeia” infects the story with specter of death. Ligeia is the wife of the unnamed narrator, a mysterious beautiful woman versed in the arcane arts and obsessed with coming back from death. “The Conqueror Worm,” a poem written before Ligeia’s death, alludes to the events of the story inculcating the narrative with menace and hinting at Ligeia’s horrifying victory over

death. Using the elevated diction of poetry heightens events filling the rest of the narrative with a propulsive dread that rushes towards the story's climax. Ligeia writes:

Out — out are the lights — out all!  
And over each quivering form,  
The curtain, a funeral pall,  
Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
And the angels, all pallid and wan,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”  
And its hero the Conqueror Worm. (269)

The imagery offers a foreshadowing of the narrator's bridal chamber. The darkness and quivering forms, the curtain and funeral pall evoke the ephemeral transcendent world of the chamber, but the narrator and the reader are left these words with very little explanation save they are the death troughs of Ligeia. The language is meant to evoke an existential ennui; however, the imagery of the curtain coming down echoes the physical space of the Lady Rowena's wedding chamber with its multitude of effects that are meant to create the sensations of fear and pleasure.

The poems of both Roderick Usher and Ligeia foreshadow these conclusions and provide an atmosphere of dread. The narrator of Usher reads from the “*Mad Trist*” of *Sir Launcelot Canning*, an adventure story meant to alleviate Roderick's grief and anxiety over the recent death of his sister. The fictive adventurer Ethelred must confront a dragon to win a treasure. Slowly the tension of the *Mad Trist* echoes Usher's growing apprehension. Through the intertextual narrative, the tension of Poe's story intensifies for

Usher, the narrator, and the reader as they react to the growing tension of the Mad Trist.

The narrator describes the confluence of story and events, saying “[I]t 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 stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described” (336). The echo of first Usher’s poem “The Haunted Palace” and then the narrative of Ethelred creates an echo chamber of effects, shaping the narrative into a confluence of affective and narrative events that ingeniously reverberate throughout the story. The modulating features of the “The Haunted Palace” and the “*Mad Trist*” of *Sir Launcelot Canning*, along with the narrator’s references to Henry Fuseli’s painting, create an intensifying effect within the story, inundating the reader with multiple and varying images.

Similarly, this intensifying effect of these intertextual elements can be seen as the narrator’s actions in “Ligeia” echo the poem “The Conqueror Worm.” As the narrator brings Lady Rowena to the bridal chamber and perhaps drugs her, he echoes the poem. The narrator writes, “I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone. I stirred not — but gazed upon the apparition. There was a mad disorder in my thoughts — a tumult unappeasable” (276-277). Here, the tragedy of the conqueror worm is echoed by the quivering body of Lady Rowena and the narrator’s own emotional and physical reactions possibly due to his drug use and the gruesome architecture of the bridal chamber he has obsessively designed. Using a similar descriptive palate in the remaining lines of the story, Poe draws a

comparison to Ligeia's poem and the concluding scene. Viewing Lady Rowena's changed form is as much an internal act as a physical one. The narrator calls these combined reactions unutterable fancies, citing both the motion of thought and the paralyzing nature of the physical world, describing a vigorous stasis which mimics the tragedy of death. Sensing these things, the narrator and the reader's exposure to the poem heightens the revelation of Ligeia and create a reverberating effect once Ligeia is resurrected and the story concludes with the narrator and the reader frozen in astonishment.

These intertextual elements emphasize the dramatic effect of reading, creating a space concerned with the excitation of the senses and the intellect. Through these elements, Poe collapses the sensual and rational world leaving the protagonist and the reader at a moment of dynamic conclusion. The story ends in a tableau with the protagonist stuck between thought and action which similarly leaves the reader in a heightened state of astonishment. Much like Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* invited the viewer to both participate in the narrative and stand outside viewing the elements of the painting, Poe closely identifies the reader with the narrator on an emotional level and yet removes them, allowing the reader to experience the distorting elements of the intertextual materials, along with the clearly identifiable Gothic elements. In "The Gothic of Reading and Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'" Harriet Hustis writes, "It would seem that Poe is interested in creating more than just a bizarre story of incisive parody—his dual critique and enactment of the Gothic in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' represent an exploration of the very nature of Gothic textuality itself and its effects (both aesthetic and psychic) on the reader" (116). Poe allows the reader to identify

with the narrator yet, echoing Edmund Burke's notion of studied distance, places the reader in a space outside of the text where they can recognize the Gothic textual elements of the story. The texts elevate the atmosphere of dread, and yet speaks directly to the narrative as a constructed Gothic space. In this way, these intertextual elements represent the action within each story and distort it simultaneously.

#### **2.4.2. Obsessive design**

While these collapsing moments are a singular aspect of Poe's grotesque, another element is the appearance of obsessively designed rooms or objects within these stories. The object whether created as art or a mechanical piece of technology looms large in Poe's grotesque aesthetic. Always interested in creation, Poe also explores the question what occurs when a design is brought into existence. These objects are equal parts designed spaces and a literal mind space embodying the protagonist's obsession. The structures, whether they are the elaborate bridal chamber in "Ligeia" or the apparatus of the pendulum in "The Pit and the Pendulum," describe an obsessively-designed architecture. While the intertextual materials create a mystical dread and a propulsive push towards the story's conclusion, these objects renegotiate reality and by doing so are a means to obsessively control the body of others.

A particularly notable example of this obsessive design is Prince Prospero's abbey in "The Masque of the Red Death" which he designs to encapsulate death in a space built and defined by his own magisterial power. Prospero creates a microcosm of his kingdom. The narrator describes the rooms of the abbey:

The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at

each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue — and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange — the fifth with white — the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue... It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to harken to the sound. (486)

The seven chambers mimic the organization of a week and yet the various colors, the spacing of these chambers as not being able to be viewed together and the adornment of the final black room with an obsidian clock create a series of rooms that not only regulate space, but time. The chambers order the ingress and exit of each reveler as well as Prospero's proviso that each participate pause each hour to acknowledge the death and disease he is saving them from and as a reminder to the party goers that time erodes

everything. Interestingly, the barbaric obsession with which the prince organizes the abbey transmutes to the bodies of the revealers. Prospero's fanatical need to regulate the revealers' bodies goes to the extremity of him creating a masque ball and dressing the attendees. The revealers are described as "[A]rabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust" (Poe 488). Within these rooms decorated in moody representation of days, Prospero adorns the revealers, creating a collection of grotesques which parallel the distorted, plague-torn kingdom of the outside world. These adornments are both an indicator of Prospero's power to hold death and disease at abeyance and a way to mock the presence of death as merely a costume.

Prospero's obsessive design is a means to construct a reality that represents the greater world outside the abbey as well as reflect the anxiety of the revealers that manifests when the clock strikes the hour. The aesthetic of the chambers modulates the exigencies of time symbolized by the ticking clock and naturalizes the movement of the revealer who must tread through these rooms in a prescribed order. These designs distort reality. Creating the chambers and emphasizing the moments of silence as the clock rings every hour, Prospero's obsession simultaneously represents and distorts reality. Prospero's obsessive need to design away death allows the 'avatar of blood' the red death to permeate the abbey. The ghastly revelers affixed in their costumes cloak the agent of death, thus allowing him entrance into the world of the abbey. The revealers costumes are meant to emblemize disease without sharing in the epidemic, instead they distort the purpose of Prospero's obsession and create a space that is only disease. In *Entropic*



*Imagination in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death,"* Hubert Zapf calls this imaginative order which falls to chaos Entropic Imagination or a structure that inevitably breeds disorder. Zapf writes:

Human life itself is seen in terms of a cultural artifact which contains in the specific way in which it attempts to ensure its order the dynamics that continually increases its disorder. It is shown to accelerate its self-consuming tendencies by the very act of its intended "autonomization." The "Red Death" as the determining agent of the text is not really an outside force but is inherent in the ways in which, by means of political power-structures and the structures of artistic imagination, human life tries to become independent from the forces of chaos and annihilation surrounding it. (212-1-213)

The ceremony of the masque perpetuates a chaos inherent in the obsessive order of the prince's designs. Confronting the Red Death, Prospero discovers the masked figure is not corporeal, but empty clothes. Prospero quickly perishes as the world of the abbey slips into paradox. The Red Death reduced to an empty signifier subverts the notion of a symbolic order. The narrative shifts into indeterminacy as the meaning of Prospero's design reverts to the chaos. Zapf continues, "Herein, the world of the story is once more exposed as the world of a cultural artifact that consumes itself in the same way in which the fictional categories that are used by Poe to communicate this world— i.e., space, time, characters, action, and symbolism—consume themselves in the process of the text" (217). As Zapf notes, Prospero's organizing parameters ironically create chaos, not only in the events of the narrative, but the story as a textual structure that houses meaning. Poe's Red Death infects the reader with the same terror as Prospero and the revealers.

Meaning is upended; the signifier becomes an emblem of distortion rather than representation. Death lives and the abbey, a place meant to sustain life, becomes a crypt.

Similar to the way Poe positions the affective reader to identify with the protagonist on a bodily level and is simultaneously distanced by the intertextual elements; his protagonist's' obsessive designs create a binary. Much like the affective reader, the obsessive design of Poe's protagonists creates a moment of paradox where order and chaos are inverted. This grotesque effect allows for organized art that conveys the antipathy of its design, an indeterminate effect which is both structure and disorganization.

### **2.4.3. Haptic space**

Whether writing about the philosophy of poetry or how furniture is placed in a room, aesthetics are not merely empty vessel of beautiful expression for Poe. Taste is the effect of a mind comfortable with what John Keats described as Negative Capability, the ability for an artist to deal with uncertainty without manufacturing reasons to explain ambiguity (Harmon 342). Taking a cue from Burke, Poe's poetics are based on a beauty that terrifies and a terror that is beautiful. Poe's hyperbolic stories are urgently concerned with transcending the rational and physical universe. As Alan Lloyd-Smith wrote about Poe, "the interplay between reason and horror released the energies of his most powerful work," and that the 'crises or break down of reason gave Poe his great themes" (Ellis 24). The grand theme as Smith describes it is not merely rationalism versus chaos, but a means to describe an aesthetic chiefly concerned with the concept of haptic space. Iris Marion Young captures the idea of haptic in *On Female Body Experience* where she describes "an orientation to sensuality as such that includes all senses" (69). For the

purposes of this analysis, the term haptic space refers to the way in which Poe creates rooms and other places in his stories imbued with a mix of sensations which both reflect and distort perception.

While we've sketched the connection between the two major elements of the grotesque, analyzing Poe's non-fiction essay "The Philosophy of Furniture" as well as "The Philosophy of Composition" gives great insight to his use of haptic space. In both "The Philosophy of Furniture" and "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe obsessively considers uniformity and variation. Poe's essay on furniture is as much a screed against capitalism as an article on taste; interestingly, he doesn't separate the collection and arrangement of objects with their meaning. Poe considers the way Americans arrange their rooms as "an evil growing out of our republican institutions, that here a man of large purse has usually a very little soul which he keeps in it. The corruption of taste is a portion or a pendant of the dollar-manufacture. As we grow rich, our ideas grow rusty" (156-157). The corruption of taste is not only the ugly or misaligned but a space whose meanings are discordant without any sensual or intellectual depth. For Poe, the collection of objects, similar to the arrangement of words, are based on the construction of effect. Creating a series of objects then is a linking of both intellectual symbols and a sensuality that gives dimension and weight to the world. A visitor entering a room is similar to a reader entering the world of a story and is meant to facilitate an immersion in a space of pure aesthetics.

As a term whose commencement began in the visual arts, it's important to examine Poe's grotesque in similar terms in which he describes the visual field. Poe's haptic space can be neither too uniform nor too chaotic but must be modulated towards

an effect. As Poe writes, “both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide on the higher merits of a painting, suffice for decision on the adjustment of a chamber” (156). As literature was for most of Poe’s contemporaries a means to impart a moral lesson perhaps the most important aspect of the artist was moral clarity. However, Poe’s eschewed didacticism, preferring that if it was included at all that it was understated. The grotesque is known for viewing art not as a reflective surface meant to replicate reality, but a space of pure artistic creation. Similarly, Poe’s description of the mirrors placed within a room illustrates his view of representation. Poe writes, “Now the slightest thought will be sufficient to convince anyone who has an eye at all, of the ill effect of numerous looking-glasses, and especially of large ones. Regarded apart from its reflection, the mirror presents a continuous, flat, colorless, unrelieved surface, — a thing always and obviously unpleasant. Considered as a reflector, it is potent in producing a monstrous and odious uniformity: and the evil is here aggravated, not in merely direct proportion with the augmentation of its sources, but in a ratio constantly increasing” (156). Poe’s words emphasize his view of representation as something that offers distortion and monstrosity though it's meant to represent life. One’s drawn back then to emblem of art in “The Oval Portrait” where the painter’s portrait, yet another kind of mirror, along with the intertextual description of how it was created does not reproduce life, but distorts it to such a degree these notions collapse.

With the reverberation of these diverse sensations constantly increasing, the grotesque mixture of symbol and sign create an uneasy complication within the text, the painting embodying this disjuncture as the story’s conclusion becomes a representation of

living death. In a similar vein, the narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum” is obsessed with the gaudy blade that simultaneously creates dread of his impending death and a giddy excitement that is the excess of life. The story becomes like the implements of the torture in the title, an embodiment of this giddy expression of terror and invigorating life. The reader is left with a suffusion of feeling and exhilarating dread, death and life captured in a singular reflection of art’s empath.

Poe’s grotesque is situated by a sumptuous, pleasurable despair. This despair is not a singular emotional outpouring, but rather a deeper longing for transcendence. Poe’s aesthetic demands these complications not only astonishing the reader rationally and bodily, but suggesting a haptic space where these elements transcend the categories of rational or physical, mental or bodily. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe describes the elements essential in story writing, “Two things are invariably required — first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness — some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that richness (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with the ideal” (1384). These ideals are vastly important to Poe’s grotesque which compounds the rational and the irrational, the outward and the internal, all the while hinting at a haptic space where these complexities realign. Poe realigns metaphysics and the rational world in the eyes of lady Ligeia, eschew linear time and traditional spirituality in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, shows us the living embodiment of death in “The Masque of the Red Death” and illustrates the vast yawning tarn of Usher which redefines structure into its absence, symbolized by the sentient livid mist.

Using the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space, Poe constructs the grotesque as a means to trouble the reader, asking them to question the rational and effective reaction as they further interrogate their own notion of the universe as a place of stability and meaning. Poe's grotesque then is not simply a portrayal of monstrosity, but an aesthetic that creates a sumptuous uncertainty; it is a haptic space that subverts beauty and death that upsets the binaries of interior and exterior while hinting at a transcendence beyond human understanding.

### **2.5. Overall Effects**

Edgar Allan Poe's grotesque depicts the beautiful and the sublime, pleasure and pain, without fully representing one overriding value. Poe, using Burke's description of these aesthetic categories, creates tales that emphasize three elements: the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space as a means to create the grotesque in his short fiction. What does Poe hope to do by creating a sense of indeterminacy? Wolfgang Kayser writing about the artist and the grotesque asks a similar question, "[W]hat point of view is the alienated world represented? And from what point of view is the alienated world represented? Both questions lead us back to the creative process. One answer was given again and again through the ages by artists as well as by critics: the estranged world appears in the vision of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments" (186). Poe conveys the power of creation to touch something supernal, universal, a space that lives beyond death. Many of Poe's tales are literally about life after death, but the grotesque allows him to create art that is constantly varied in its effects because it is never overdetermined by didacticism. While Poe's tales are frequently told in retrospect, using the grotesque allows him to cage the reader in a

moment of astonishment, a sensation that leaves a lingering awareness that moves beyond the page. The mind of the artist or dreamer is one that is always swamped with conflicting notions, distortion and representation, pleasure and pain, grief and laughter.

In this sense, Poe's grotesque allows him to touch the seed of artistic thought, the obsessive need to destroy and create, clarify and distort. Kayser writes, "[T]he truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at the final interpretation of the grotesque: AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD" (188, the block letters are Kayser's emphasis). By invoking these 'demonic' forces Poe creates as the painter "The Oval Portrait" says 'Life itself!' Life for Poe is a constant subversion of obsessions, melancholy, grief, absurdity, masochism, and every aspect of human existence. John T. Irwin in *American Hieroglyphics* writes of "Eureka: A Prose Poem," Poe's last work that delineate the structure of the universe, "What the poem Eureka, at once pre-Socratic and post-Newtonian asserts is the truth of the feeling, the bodily intuition, that the diverse objects which the mind discovers in contemplating external nature form a unity, that they are all parts of one body which, if not infinite is so gigantic as to be beyond both spatial and temporal limits of human perception" (Bloom 2). As Irwin asserts, Poe describes a space beyond the limits of the bodily senses yet somehow tied to the greater world in a way that connects the individual to something much larger than assumed notions of God. Describing such a sensation is Poe's mission which he performs by using the grotesque. Using Burke's aesthetic categories, Poe conjures the indeterminate world, beautiful and sublime, connected to the body, but summoned exclusively from the mind of the

individual. Poe's grotesque hints at a larger connection to a sublime power that worries the thread of what it means to exist as individuals and describes a transcendence in which the dark corridors of the mind are obsessively trying to connect to something greater. Poe's effect is never totalizing. His protagonist labor in the turbulent connections they make with death, memory, collapse, psychosis, obsession, grief, that are the essence of--- life itself!



## CONCLUSION: TO GRASP DISORDER

Edgar Allan Poe's body of work is elliptical. While contemporaries like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville pointed towards a moral type of American storytelling, complex yet purposeful, Poe's work emphasizes philosophical sensationalism, a fictive form that elicits a metaphysical yearning. Poe gestures towards the obsessive need to build our own fates and the impossibility of a morality that lives only by the individual's desires. This thesis analyzes Poe's use of the grotesque and how that aesthetic creates a series of conflicting notions within the reader. By discussing Poe's eighteenth century influences, it traces the important precursors that informed his work: Burke's aesthetic categories, Walpole's Gothic form, and Fuseli's evocation of the viewer as interior and distanced from the work of art. One of Poe's contributions to the American Gothic is defined and illustrated by how the grotesque interacts within his fiction.

A possible next step in this scholarship is linking Poe's particular form of the grotesque aesthetic to Southern Gothic. Similar to Poe's use of the gothic form to harken back to the past, southern writers of the post-Civil War era wrote in a historical moment when the past and the present moment of the south came in great conflict. Tracing a line of influence from Edgar Allan Poe to writers like William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor would illustrate Poe's influence as a particularly southern writer and connect the creation of a grotesque sensibility with discursive notions of the South.

Poe's use of a grotesque aesthetic enables him to create the specific effect within his fiction. The three elements of Edgar Allan Poe's grotesque--the affective reader, obsessive design, and haptic space--combine to create his unique vision of Burke's beautiful and sublime. The combination of the beautiful and sublime in Poe's work is a

tenuous one. Perhaps Poe's purpose in constructing this grotesque aesthetic is best expressed in twentieth century poet A.R. Ammons' poem "Corsons Inlet":

I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will  
not run to that easy victory:  
still around the looser, wider forces work:  
I will try  
to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening  
scope, but enjoying the freedom that  
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,  
that I have perceived nothing completely,  
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.

Edgar Allan Poe's work is concerned with how order and chaos are linked within the universe. Discovering this chaos in his intricately organized stories, Poe hopes to "fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder" and, illustrating these grotesque figurations of time and art, emphasize the connection of the finite and infinite. As Poe emphasizes in "Eureka: A Prose Poem," these connections fashion the ordering principle of the universe. Poe places the reader within these structures in his short fiction, too, exposing us to what Hubert Zapf calls entropic imagination or a structure that breed chaos. Poe's obsessive design is not meant to trap us within uncertainty and pain, but point out a universal order of chaos within structure. Poe's grotesque aesthetic illustrates this cosmological concept, describing both the individual and the greater scope of the universe.

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