

THE REACTIONARY NATURE OF POE'S GOTHIC TALES

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BY

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ABSTRACT

Poe has been celebrated as a genius and deprecated as a plagiarist. Some see him as a symbolist while others regard him as a candidate for psychoanalysis. Despite the variety of critical approaches, however, the label of "Gothic" is often applied to Poe's tales. His stories do contain typical Gothic paraphernalia and settings, but this paper examines instead the extent to which Poe's stories express an ambivalent attitude, common to Gothic literature, in reaction to social changes occurring in America.

Gothic fiction was seen by many as a revolutionary form due to its tendency to collapse long-established boundaries and to promote new subject matter. Yet Gothic can also be called a reactionary form. Coming at a time when absolute monarchy in Europe was starting to be replaced by more democratic systems, this type of literature often responded with stories of individuals who, although perhaps heroic in their uniqueness and desire for knowledge and power, were almost inevitably damned.

America in the early to mid 1800's was dealing with many of the same issues. Individualism of both the country and the common man was hailed, much to the dismay of many who felt that this led to isolation and a loss of community. In many of Poe's tales the focus is on an alienated, solitary hero who perhaps willingly but inevitably steps outside the boundaries of society. This leads not to independence, but isolation and torment. By losing touch with everyday reality one may gain revelations or transcendental experiences, but these experiences end in madness and death for Poe's characters.

In many ways Poe's tales seem to suggest the dangers of progressive individualism. This paper involves a close reading of Poe's tales in order to determine the extent to which they may be considered examples of reactionary Gothic literature.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: Poe as a Defender of the Individual	9
CHAPTER 2: The Individual Becomes the Mob	23
CHAPTER 3: Reaction to "Radical Individualism"	36
CONCLUSION	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY	71

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe, at least as much as any other writer of his time, was able to capture the sensation of isolation. His characters have always been noted for their tendency to shun human companionship willingly, or their inability to fit into the mainstream of society despite their best efforts. Although Poe wrote numerous poems and insightful criticism, his stories in particular are haunting in their depiction of the alienated individual who, because left completely alone, faces almost certain death or madness. Thus in exploring this theme in Poe's works I will focus solely on his short stories. They encompass many genres, from gothic tale, to science fiction, to the detective story, to outright parody or farce. Despite their apparent dissimilarity, however, the image of the outsider recurs too often to be dismissed, and thus I propose to examine Poe's attitude towards the idea of individualism, an area which has often been mentioned in Poe criticism, but generally in passing and to no effect.

During his brief career, Poe was the subject of much debate, which continued even after his death in 1849. Perhaps more than any other writer Poe has been able to stir the emotions of critics, prompting responses ranging from enthusiastic approval to thorough distaste. Within his own country Poe generally received little favorable recognition, at least until recent years. Henry James remarked of Poe: "It seems to us that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection" (qtd. in Kesterson 31). Eliot agreed that although Poe had a powerful intellect, "it seems to me the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty" (qtd. in Kesterson 46). Even closer to his own time Poe was often criticized for provinciality and a lack of

sophistication. Emerson called him "the jingle man" (qtd. in Broussard 23), and Whitman lamented his lack of moral principle (qtd. in Kesterson 35). In later years, Poe gained favor with the French, due largely to Baudelaire's ardent translation of his works. Baudelaire felt that, "his style is always pure, adequate to his ideas and expresses them exactly. Poe is always correct" (qtd. in Kesterson 26). Despite grudging praise of his craftsmanship other critics, such as Aldous Huxley, could not reconcile themselves to his subject matter. Huxley called Poe vulgar, and noted that "he is, as it were, one of Nature's Gentlemen, unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste" (qtd. in Kesterson 40). Hemingway disapproved of Poe's style of writing, commenting that "it is skillful, marvelously constructed, and it is dead" (qtd. in Broussard 36). Later critics were more appreciative of Poe's abilities. A.H. Quinn, for example, described him as "the one writer in the English language, who was foremost in criticism, supreme in fiction, and in poetry destined to be immortal" (695).

Despite all the contrasting estimations of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, there often seemed to be a consensus that the best way to understand his writings was by trying to understand the man and his life. This led to an abundance of criticism in which Poe was psychoanalyzed, labeled a psychotic, alcoholic, narcissistic and necrophiliac drug addict who wrote about his own personal obsessions. Similarly, critics have liked to read the often unnamed narrators of Poe's stories as Poe himself, living out his fantasies of murder, madness and perversion. Lawrence, for example, makes the following observation in his discussion of "Ligeia": "But Poe wanted to know--wanted to know what was the strangeness in the eyes of Ligeia...Edgar Allan probed and probed. So often he seemed on the verge. But she went over the verge of death before he came over the verge of knowledge" (76). Here Lawrence is making the all too common mistake in Poe criticism of conflating Poe with the narrator of the story. David Rein falls into the same trap in his

discussion of the narrator of "A Loss of Breath": "Just as Poe was mistreated in real life so is this man mistreated, by the passengers in the carriage, the surgeon, the apothecary, the criminal, and even the cats" (26). Here Rein seems to suggest that Poe is actually writing about the misfortunes of his own life under the fictional screen of a man who has literally lost his breath.

Certainly there may be some value in exploring the undeniably unique and troubled life of Edgar Allan Poe in order to gain insight into the issues raised in his works. However, to limit understanding of the works to an understanding of his mentality, without considering how they may function thematically or stylistically, seems ultimately limiting. Thus I propose to examine his use of the hero-outsider in his stories in a relatively unexplored context, that of Gothic fiction. Many critics have used the label "Gothic" to describe Poe's fiction, but rarely have they specified what their definition of Gothic literature is, or how Poe's works fit this genre. Any extensive discussion of Poe as a Gothic writer is apt to point to his use of oppressive, nightmarish atmosphere, typical settings with crumbling castles and victimized maidens, or gothic trappings such as phantom-like figures and supernatural phenomena. Yet I feel that these accounts often miss a crucial aspect of Poe's use of the Gothic, namely his motivation for choosing this particular genre of fiction. Although it is often suggested that Poe capitalized on Gothic devices because he was aware of their popularity with the reading public, I feel that he was also attracted to the Gothic because it often reflected his own ambiguities and uncertainties about social changes.

Describing Poe as a "Gothic" writer tends to diminish his achievements, for Gothic literature has rarely been highly regarded by the literary establishment. Poe, however, goes beyond the mere outward conventions of the Gothic and in fact uses it as a vehicle to explore certain ideas and themes. One of the central recurring images in Poe's short

stories is that of the alienated hero/villain, the man who has willingly or otherwise been cut off from his society and in his loneliness and isolation is destroyed by madness or death. This type of character was central to Gothic fiction. Schedoni, in Radcliffe's The Italian, or Frankenstein in Shelley's novel, isolate themselves by cutting themselves off from virtue and dividing themselves from their fellow men. They are unlike others, and yet are grudgingly admired for this. William Patrick Day describes the Gothic novel as being about characters who "are essentially active men, attempting to realize their desires through the efforts of their own will; above all, they are men engaged in the process of creating, or recreating, their own identities" (17). However positive this may sound to our romantic ideas about self-creation and individuality, Day elaborates that "the protagonist is always alone. The [Gothic] fantasy defines its world as a place where there exists one self; everything else in that world is Other, an enemy to the desires and integrity of the self" (19). This ultimately means a very lonely life for the Gothic hero/villain. At times this extreme individualism allows some men, such as Dupin or Legrand in Poe, to achieve great deeds and rise above their fellow men. These stories of the benefits of singularity, however, are far outnumbered by those in which the isolated hero is doomed.

The theme of the struggle for individualism is nothing new for Gothic literature. The Gothic is generally acknowledged to be a Protestant form (see Fiedler 138), particularly in its anxiety about the past and its attempt to break away from old forms and create something entirely new. Emerging out of the middle class, this literature placed a strong emphasis on individualism, although this notion of autonomy created some philosophical problems for its writers. In feudal society there had been what was perceived as a symbiotic relationship between society and the individual, implying a lack of identity when apart from the whole. People were interdependent and interchangeable, not unique. Those who tried to be individuals were seen as egotistic, narcissistic and damned

to a fall. By the eighteenth century, however, this world view was changing due to both philosophical and intellectual revolutions, and the individual, although separate and isolated, became more valued. This contradictory view was often reflected in the Gothic novels of the time: "The male protagonists embody the values and ideals of the modern individualist...their visions of power and identity parody both the romantic faith in the power of individual imagination and the bourgeois faith in individual effort and energy" (Day 97). Brendan Hennessy's description of the Gothic hero as "all pale, beautiful, haunted by guilt, with amazing eyes, melancholy, superior and proud, mostly also misanthropic, ruthless, mysterious, heroic and villainous" (36) reinforces the idea of the increasing attraction to the individual, cut off from society. Many critics agree that the Gothic is ultimately revolutionary in its ideas about human nature and relationships. De Sade, for example, felt that "Gothicism allies itself with revolutionary movements because it cannot tolerate any restriction of the individual, and thus Gothicism is not merely revolutionary but anarchistic in its sympathies" (qtd. in Bayer-Berenbaum 43). Certainly the Gothic challenged fundamental notions of aesthetics and psychology in its transgression of approved literary forms and subjects, and for this reason is often seen as a subversive genre.

In response, however, many critics point out that despite its apparently revolutionary beginnings, the Gothic soon began to express a fearful reaction to the enormous changes taking place at the time. Judith Wilt points out that "counter-attack seems in a way the primary mode of the gothic" (620), and other critics agree that it is deeply conservative and reactionary. Boundaries are continually being crossed or collapsed in Gothic fiction, but this is usually seen as horrifying rather than liberating. Many of the typical figures of Gothic fiction reveal the attitude towards disorder. The wanderer, such as Melmoth in Charles Maturin's novel, who has defied God in some way

and has thus transgressed one of the fundamental boundaries, is punished by everlasting life on earth. Rather than a reward, immortality is a state of isolation, loss of communication with humanity which the wanderer would gladly trade for a normal, humble life. Similarly the vampires in the novels of both Polidori and Stoker are portrayed as being estranged from humanity and bitter despite their great power. They disrupt human relationships through sheer spite, such as Ruthven's vengeful destruction of both Ianthe and Aubrey's sister. The seeker of forbidden knowledge is another of the most common figures in Gothic literature. Frankenstein, Vathek, Ambrosio the Monk and many others have also transgressed boundaries and thus threatened social order. The 'over-reacher' is seen as disruptive and worthy of punishment for his attempts to set himself apart from the rest of mankind. It is dangerous in the Gothic to step outside of any boundary. Being individual or unique becomes a sort of sin, for in trying to *not* be like your fellow men you are calling attention to yourself and risking retribution. The Gothic often uses this sort of character to reflect common religious anxieties, for all of the "seekers of knowledge" are abandoning the traditional idea of God by replacing it with themselves. Thus in many ways the Gothic can be seen as counseling obedience and conformity, for despite its creation of numerous Gothic heroes who are grudgingly admired for their refusal to submit to the wishes of others, these heroes are generally punished in the end for their hubristic attitudes.

In terms of its oscillation between revolution and reaction, Gothic literature accurately reflects the attitudes of the times. Although the Gothic was a Protestant, bourgeois form in its celebration of the individual, it did acknowledge that the notion of autonomy could be dangerous. Excessive connections with or reliance on others undermines individuality, yet a loss of these connections with others leads to isolation. If society is comprised of totally isolated parts, how can it function? Thus there was a fear

of "progressive individualism", of the result of personal relationships becoming replaced by market relationships in which individuals become merely property. The boundaries created between people make it difficult, if at all possible, to "know" others at all, for everyone is trapped within their own closed circle. David Punter describes this contradictory message as, "the dialectic of Gothic", and claims that it portrays "the problems of a society in which the individual is encouraged towards the maximization of profit while it is realized that a society wholly comprised of such individuals would be in fact unbearable, if not unthinkable" (415). The values of society appeared irreconcilable with the values of the individual.

The same dialectic, the oscillation between celebrating and undermining the individual, appears in Poe's short stories. He uses certain Gothic conventions to express his own often fearful and ambivalent reaction to one particular social trend. At times he defends the enormous powers of those men who refuse to be limited to the fate of the common man. This will be the focus of Chapter 1 of this thesis. Characters such as Dupin and Legrand gain fame and monetary rewards for their superior reasoning abilities. The narrator of "A Descent into the Maelstrom" is able to survive what no other man has lived through due to his unique mental powers. Montresor is never punished due to his clear-headed planning of "the perfect crime". Yet these seemingly positive stories of people with unique abilities are far outnumbered by ones in which individualism is less enthusiastically portrayed. In Chapter 2, I will examine Poe's depiction of how the individual, who lives mostly for himself with few social ties, soon becomes an anonymous member of the mob. Individualism and democracy become taken to the extreme in these stories. With no ties between people, they are isolated even when among others. Poe's theme here is a very Gothic one, for "if there is one central area of fear the Gothic novel exploits it is the fear of losing one's sense of self as a human being in relation

to the family, the state, and God. Throughout the development of the Gothic narrative runs the primary fear of the monstrosity of singularity" (Gross 8). These stories, such as "The Devil in the Belfry" and "The Man of the Crowd", often take the form of satire on trends in his own society. Finally, in Chapter 3 I explore how Poe takes his unease with individualism even further in many of his most Gothic stories. These tales deal largely with people who are naturally inclined to isolation due to a "heightened sensibility" or madness, such as in "Berenice", "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". In contrast are the characters who break the boundaries of society willingly through a search for knowledge, as in "Morella", "Ligeia" and "Ms. Found in a Bottle", or through crime, in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat". Finally, Poe also presents those who attempt to cut themselves off from the rest of society through voluntary isolation, as in "The Masque of the Red Death" and "Shadow: A Parable". Whatever their reasons, almost all of the characters who transgress the boundaries of society are ultimately destroyed in these stories. Despite, or perhaps because of, his ambivalent attitude towards the notion of individualism, Poe consistently uses Gothic conventions and structures in order to express his reaction to a social phenomenon.

CHAPTER 1: POE AS A DEFENDER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In several of his stories, Poe portrays characters who are unique to the point of idiosyncrasy but who benefit greatly from their refusal or inability to be like other men. In these stories, the individual is able to rise above his fellow men in order to gain some reward, perhaps fame or monetary gain, through his use of extraordinary reasoning powers. The Gothic has many such characters. Despite their sin of presumption, it is hard not to feel some grudging admiration for Frankenstein or Vathek. Their attempts to achieve more than the ordinary man won them respect although it also caused their downfall. Even "evil" Gothic characters such as Ambrosio the Monk, Manfred or Montoni can be seen as heroes simply for their refusal to conform to society and limit themselves to ordinary realms.

Poe's works contain many of these exceptional characters who surpass their average counterparts. In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841), for example, the old man survives his terrifying experience through his ability to remain calmly analytical even in a life-threatening situation. At the beginning of the story, the old man states his intention to tell the stranger about his amazing experience: "About three years past, there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man--or at least such as no man ever survived to tell of--and the six hours of deadly terror which I then endured have broken me up body and soul" (341). Thus from the beginning it is clear that what he is about to relate is no ordinary event, but something of such unique proportions that he is the only man who has survived to tell of it. He is set apart right away from the group of Lofoden fishermen to which he had previously belonged, for none of them had ever encountered the Maelstrom. In addition, he emphasizes the fact that the result of this

unusual experience has caused him to become even more withdrawn, for he has become nervous and physically frail, and his hair has turned from black to white overnight.

Obviously such drastic effects make the stranger aware that this must indeed have been an exceptional event which the old man has undergone. The old man starts by describing the apparently normal life he led previously. Along with his two brothers he made his living as a fisherman, a common occupation in the district of Lofoden near the Norwegian coast. Yet even before his adventure, the old man and his brothers were unique in that, "among the whole of the Lofoden coastmen, we three were the only ones who made a regular business of going out to the islands, as I tell you" (345). While the other fishermen stay close to their home, the three brothers fish "among the islands beyond Moskoe, nearly to Vurrgh" (345). This is a more dangerous location because of the Maelstrom, yet the three brothers are willing to risk physical safety in return for a greater yield of fish. The other fishermen safely fish in known areas but produce less. Thus the old fisherman always stood apart from his community in his refusal to take the common safe route. As a result of this daring venture across the Maelstrom, the brothers put their lives in danger. Caught in an unexpected storm one day they miss the slack tide and find themselves in the midst of the Maelstrom. One brother is swept away, leaving the other two to face the horrors of this dreaded natural phenomenon. Although his remaining brother is panicked and desperate enough to try to pry his hands off an iron ring he is clutching, the old man reveals that "it may appear strange, but now, when we were in the very jaws of the gulf, I felt more composed than when we were approaching it. Having made up my mind to hope no more, I got rid of a great deal of that terror which had unmanned me at first" (349). The old man apparently quite calmly decides to overcome his fear and to take note of what he experiences:

After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depth, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see. These, no doubt, were singular fancies to occupy a man's mind in such extremity--and I have often thought since, that the revolutions of the boat around the pool might have rendered me a little light-headed. (349)

His reaction to such a terrifying event is not the expected one. His presence of mind and intellectual curiosity combine to leave him self-possessed and even excited by the new experience he is undergoing. He begins to play an analytic game in which he tries to determine which of the debris spinning around with him will be the first to be sucked into the bottom of the Maelstrom, noting that "I must have been delirious, for I even sought amusement in speculating upon the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below" (351).

Critics tend to disagree about the significance of the old man's experience in the Maelstrom, although they generally concur that the events relate in some way to the idea of individuality and personal identity. On one hand, it is the narrator's willingness to sacrifice his personal identity to the whirlpool through death that saves him. His awe and admiration of the great force of nature and his feeling of being lucky to experience such an adventure suggest that it is by laying aside fears for his own self that he is saved and regains his self-identity. Thus by falling into the whirlpool his selfhood or individuality is at least temporarily destroyed, for he becomes merely another object, a bit of debris, spinning around the giant funnel. However, his capacity to reason and his humble respect for nature allow him to regain his selfhood and save his life (see Selley in Fisher 99). Other critics disagree with this view, suggesting that "A Descent into the Maelstrom" belongs with several other stories of Poe's in which "personal identity is obliterated by voyaging into some fearful vortex or abyss, an expression of Poe's desire to return to the

womb, according to psychoanalytically inclined critics" (Auerbach 34). Certainly the fact that the encounter with the Maelstrom has broken the old man's body and soul suggests that his former sense of identity may have been undermined. Yet the story does not end in the complete loss of personal identity which for Poe meant death. Although the old man is not in complete control of the situation, he willingly relinquishes his sense of self and is thus able to regain it. He is tossed out of the whirlpool and is picked up by another fishing boat: "Those who drew me on board were my old mates and daily companions--but they knew me no more than they would have known a traveller from the spirit land" (353). His changed appearance would account for their lack of recognition, but even upon hearing his story they refuse to believe the old man. With the loss of his two brothers and his exclusion from the fishing community, the narrator is even more alone than he was before his experience with the Maelstrom. He has "lost that self by which the entire fishing community of Lofoden had come to know him. His transformation leaves him with no identity and no common ties with the community" (Seaman 211). Certainly the fisherman is no longer his former self who was secure in his relation to the community of fishermen. Now he is misunderstood and must resort to telling his story to a stranger. It can be argued that it was his difference from others, his refusal to stay within the safe limits of Lofoden to fish, that put the narrator in such a dangerous situation. Yet it must also be acknowledged that it was his difference from other men, including his difference from his brothers, which allowed him to survive his perilous adventure. Although he gains no material reward for his mental abilities, the old fisherman escapes with his life. Poe seems uncertain, however, if mere survival is worth the price of alienation from his community.

While the benefits of being set apart from one's fellow man may be questionable in "A Descent into the Maelstrom", individualism is more clearly celebrated in Poe's detective stories. Poe is credited by many with creating the genre. His detective stories

include both the now-familiar investigator who easily outwits the bumbling police to solve the crime and an admiring but rather un insightful friend to whom the solution must be explained. Yet Poe's detective heroes are perhaps unique in their seclusion, their distaste for the community of man. Dupin, in particular, has withdrawn from society and prefers his own company to that of most men. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) he is described by the narrator as being of "an excellent, indeed of an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes" (317). Although uncontrollable circumstances are apparently the cause of his retreat from society, Dupin comes to relish his solitude and refuses to rejoin the community. He does, however, take into his company the narrator who meets Dupin as they are both in search of "the same very rare and very remarkable volume" (317). Apparently their similar nature in seeking the unusual, in being outside of the mainstream, makes the two men fit companions. They rent what is described as "a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted" (318) and effectually cut themselves off from the rest of the world:

Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world, we should have been regarded as madmen--although, perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature. Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret from my own former associates; and it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris. We existed within ourselves alone. (318)

This description is strikingly similar to the voluntary seclusion of Prince Prospero in "The Masque of the Red Death", with one important difference. Although it is another example of an individual who refuses to participate in the community of his fellow men, and is seen as bizarre for this reason by others, such seclusion works to Dupin's advantage while it

results in Prospero's death. Dupin and the narrator barricade themselves within the house, closing the shutters at the first light of dawn and venturing out only at night.

Although Dupin may be regarded as strange by others, he quickly demonstrates to the narrator and to the reader that there is a method to his madness. His superior analytic abilities allow him to seemingly read men's thoughts, which he proves to the narrator by following his silent train of thought and telling him what he was thinking. Dupin is certainly unlike most men, whom he scoffs "wore windows in their bosoms" (318), revealing their minds to anyone who is insightful enough to notice. Yet it is continually stressed that most men are not insightful. Their ideas of analysis consist of routine investigation, a fact which Dupin points to when explaining why the police are unable to solve the murder of Madame L'Esplanaye and her daughter. He notes that the police are searching for profundity when the truth may be perfectly apparent: "They have fallen into the gross but common error of confounding the unusual with the abstruse" (328). Again, this may be a common error, but Dupin is not common and is able to see the truth clearly and solves the murder by following a trail of logic and elimination.

Yet Dupin is not simply a 'thinking machine', for it is his idiosyncratic nature that allows him to understand the crime and thus solve the mystery. Levine suggests that "Poe's detective succeeds not because of a superior mechanical ability to piece together facts, but because he is an artist, and one who has more than a little in common with the artist described by Emerson in "The Poet"" (163). True analysis involves the imagination and is an artistic rather than a scientific process. Dupin certainly fits the image of the artist, cut off from his society and misunderstood by most.

More facts are learned about Dupin in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842). Although the narrator notes that after solving the murder in the Rue Morgue "the name of Dupin had grown into a household word" (397), Dupin remains isolated in his house

refusing to become a celebrity. After the murder of Marie Roget is discovered the narrator claims:

Strange as it may appear, the third week from the discovery of the body had passed, and passed without any light being thrown upon the subject, before even a rumor of the events which had so agitated the public mind reached the ears of Dupin and myself. Engaged in researches which had absorbed our whole attention, it had been nearly a month since either of us had gone abroad, or received a visiter, or more than glanced at the leading political articles in one of the daily papers. (399)

Once again it seems to be this state of seclusion preceding the murder which enables Dupin to be able to solve it. It is as if his withdrawal from the rest of society allows him to see the facts more clearly simply because he is uninvolved. The Prefect of police, G--, is much too involved in the case because his honor is at stake if he is unable to solve it. For this reason he offers Dupin what the narrator calls "a direct and certainly liberal proposition" (400), which Dupin quickly accepts. He is perfectly willing to gain financially by using his unique talents to solve the murder, which he feels will be easy to do. This time the police are making the mistake of believing the crime easy because it is ordinary, just as they felt the murder in the Rue Morgue was difficult simply because it was so unusual. Dupin suggests that although the police can imagine possible motives or means, they do not realize that just because it *could* have been, does not mean it *must* have been. Once again, Dupin is shown to think opposite to most people. He follows a logical trail, tells the police who and what to look for, and solves the crime. At this point the narrator reveals that "the result desired was brought to pass; and...the Prefect fulfilled punctually, although with reluctance, the terms of his compact with the Chevalier [Dupin]" (432). Thus Dupin is financially rewarded for his ability to think idiosyncratically.

This unique thought process is described at greater length in "The Purloined Letter" (1845), Poe's final Dupin story. Like the previous two, this one begins with Dupin

and his friend secluded in the library of their house, sitting in the dark. They are visited by Monsieur G--, the Prefect of Police, who informs them of the details of a political mystery involving a stolen letter and blackmail. He tells Dupin that it is a simple affair, for the thief is known, and yet baffling, for the letter cannot be found. Dupin once again points out why the police are unable to see the truth: "Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault...Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain...A little *too* self-evident" (594). The Prefect scoffs at this advice, but returns a month later still unable to find the letter and offers Dupin fifty thousand francs if he can be of assistance. Dupin immediately replies, "In that case...you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter" (599). The Prefect is amazed when Dupin, who has apparently solved the mystery and had the letter in his possession for some time, does just that. He is in no hurry to claim recognition for his abilities or to be admired as clever by his fellow men, but is willing to take a monetary reward.

Dupin explains at some length his method of investigation, which involves the ability to be able to match your own intellect to that of the opponent in order to understand what he may have done, a technique which he calls 'identification'. One must accurately understand the opponent's thought process, and according to Dupin the police fail at this because "their own ingenuity is a faithful representative of that of *the mass*; but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course" (601). Dupin is easily able to identify with the criminal, for like those who break the laws of society to fulfill their own desires, Dupin is also an outsider who does what he likes despite social rules to the contrary. It is as if he has a criminal mind without actually breaking the law. In fact, Dupin is a restorer of social order. Critics have pointed to the fact that Dupin is an aristocrat (a chevalier), who "puts down social insurgency and vicariously tramples on one expression of the Jacksonian ideal"

(Godden 209). Dupin reinforces an authoritarian legal system, despite his own contempt for that system. Godden goes on to suggest that "it is perhaps significant for the novel of detection that so early and influential a detective should be opposed, in so many ways, to democracy" (228). An idiosyncratic individual, Dupin nonetheless is a useful tool for "the conservative imagination which required a Dupin to bring order to the unruly mob who felt that they controlled government and society rather than the other way around" (Godden 208). Once again Poe shows a rather divided opinion of the benefits of individuality. Dupin's seclusion, his unique personality, are a prerequisite for his ability and bring him financial gain in return, but only because he is using these rare abilities to uphold the status quo. As I will demonstrate later, individuality is not praised in the stories whose characters try to step outside of society's limitations.

A slightly different version of Poe's detective is seen in one of his most popular stories, "The Gold Bug" (1843). William Legrand is of the same disposition as Dupin and, as I will discuss later, even Roderick Usher and Prince Prospero, in his desire to escape from normal society and live a hermetic life. In fact, all of these stories could be said to deal with the theme of the exiled hero: "The man of culture, who...deliberately shuts himself off from civilization and lives the life of a recluse" (Hammond 71). Yet unlike Usher and Prospero, both Dupin and Legrand benefit from this isolation.

Much like Dupin, Legrand was once wealthy although he has now been reduced to poverty. Thus he leaves New Orleans, "city of his forefathers", to live at Sullivan's Island near Charleston, South Carolina. Legrand has turned his back on his ancestry, cut himself off from any family ties in order to live alone, with only the companionship of a former slave, Jupiter, who refuses to leave him. The narrator's description of this island is the picture of desolation and seclusion. It is a narrow island, mostly sand, with little vegetation except for some myrtle shrubs at one end: "The shrub here often attains the

height of fifteen or twenty feet, and forms an almost impenetrable coppice...In the inmost recesses of this coppice, not far from the eastern or more remote end of the island, Legrand had built himself a small hut" (449). He is not content merely to adjourn to an uninhabited island but sequesters himself in the most secluded spot possible. Of course Legrand is not totally alone, for besides the company of Jupiter he has been befriended by the narrator, who finds him fascinating if a little odd and describes him as a 'recluse': "I found him well educated, with unusual powers of mind, but infected with misanthropy, and subject to perverse moods of alternate enthusiasm and melancholy" (449). Although Legrand does have companions they are unable to bring an end to his seclusion. In this way he is similar to both Usher and Prospero who despite their childhood companions or groups of friends nearby were not any less isolated.

Legrand discovers, with the help of a coded map, the treasure of Captain Kidd and then goes on to explain to his friends the method by which he broke the code. While Jupiter and the narrator believed him mad for what they regarded as strange behavior, Legrand is revealed to be much brighter than either of them in the same way that Dupin outsmarts the entire police force single-handedly. The narrator is continually confused by Legrand's explanation of the path he followed to the treasure and the simplicity of the coded writing. Like Dupin, however, Legrand proceeds systematically and despite his eccentricity is able to do what the narrator cannot. In return, he becomes rich, for the chest contains coins, gold and jewels: "We estimated the entire contents of the chest, that night, at a million and a half of dollars; and upon the subsequent disposal of the trinkets and jewels (a few being retained for our own use), it was found that we had greatly undervalued the treasure" (446). Thus like Poe's other detective stories social hierarchies are restored, for Legrand regains his fortune. Legrand is able to proceed logically along the path to the treasure where others can not, his isolation from the rest of society

apparently heightening his powers of deduction.

Yet not all of Poe's crime stories focus on the detective. In many of his tales, the perpetrator of a crime despairingly confesses all before his life ends in death or madness. "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) is unique in that it details a carefully plotted murder that is never discovered and possibly never regretted. Poe seems to be reversing one of the typical Gothic conventions in this story. Although perhaps admired for his cunning, the Gothic hero-villain is usually punished for his crimes. In fact, this story could be said to suggest that crime *does* pay, at least if one is clever enough. Montresor plans to murder Fortunato for a wrong supposedly done to him, although it is never revealed what exactly Fortunato has done to excite Montresor's desire for revenge. Rather than a crime of passion, however, Montresor coldly plans how best to proceed with his retribution: "At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled--but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong" (666). Although it may certainly be said that Montresor uses his rather cold analytical abilities to lure Fortunato to the vaults, can he be termed an outsider in the same way that the old fisherman, Dupin and Legrand are? Levine is not inclined to believe so:

There are, of course, numerous Poe characters who could be said to be isolated...I think, however, that there is nothing very profound implied by such isolation. These people are usually out of sympathy with their surroundings, and their being so is one of the factors in the development of their acute sensitivity, but Poe could do without it. Montresor and Fortunato seem to lead socially active lives, and Montresor is no less a madman for it. (222)

It may be true that Montresor has superficial social ties, but he has stepped outside of

conventional society in a radical way by breaking one of its primary taboos. In premeditating the murder of one of his "friends", Montresor has proved himself to be as isolated from his community as any of the other characters already discussed. One critic even suggests that it is Montresor's desire for isolation which leads him to commit the murder. According to Rea, revenge is not the real motive for Montresor. Discussion of the reasons behind his wish for revenge is far outweighed by his description of Fortunato as a friend who had done him deeds of kindness. Rea thus suggests that Montresor actually wants to kill Fortunato *because* he is his friend: "A part of Poe's theory of perversity is that we want to hurt or to kill or to bury alive someone because he has been good to us" (59). Although they may seek other excuses to cover this perversity, as will be discussed in my reading of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat", it is as if these characters are seeking to break any social bonds, perhaps through a fear of being involved in a close relationship with another.

"The Cask of Amontillado" is set in what Montresor calls "the supreme madness of the carnival season" (667). Amidst the great crowds of disguised individuals, it is easy to pass unnoticed, for all men seem to blend together. Thus despite the mob in the streets, Montresor is as good as alone. He easily identifies the drunken Fortunato, however, who is dressed for the event: "The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells" (667). Fortunato quickly becomes a figure of foolishness in contrast with the cold reason of Montresor.

The entire story is told with a rather black sense of humor, as Montresor easily convinces Fortunato to come to his wine cellar by discouraging him from doing so. He warns Fortunato about the dangerous nitre in the vaults, ensuring that the man will press on. The numerous jokes about Fortunato's long life and the masons all accentuate the calm and callous manner in which Montresor plans to accomplish his deed. Fortunato's

failure to recognize Montresor's true meaning serves to accentuate the distance between these two supposed friends. Gargano notes that although the characters meet at the carnival and undertake an ostensibly common journey, they are actually pursuing divergent goals (121). Their apparently casual meeting was actually a calculated plan, and Montresor's friendly words are actually full of deceit. Thus the story stresses the impossibility of *knowing* another person. For all their friendship, the gulf between Fortunato and Montresor widens as the story progresses.

Fortunato is mortared up in the vault, and Montresor remarks of his remains, "For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them" (671). In comparison, this is a rather unusual ending to a story of crime in Poe. More often than not, what he calls "the imp of the perverse" leads men to confess to crimes which otherwise would remain unsolved. Some critics would have it that the entire story is a death-bed confession in which Montresor pours out the secret that has gnawed away at him for his entire life (Thompson, Poe's Fiction, 13-14). Certainly the relating of the story takes place many years after the events, when Montresor must be an old man. His use of "You, who so well know the nature of my soul" (666) in the second line suggests he is telling his story *to* someone, possibly a priest. Although this is possible there is no direct evidence of it in the text, and Montresor's gloating tone suggest that he is not particularly contrite. Instead, it seems that Montresor has committed the perfect crime. By alienating himself from society through willing criminal activity, Montresor achieves exactly what he was hoping for. While he gains neither fame nor monetary reward as Dupin or Legrand did, he gets the satisfaction of having fulfilled both of his requirements for effective retribution. Above all, although he is never *praised* for his activities, he is not punished either. In fact, there seem to be no public consequences for his actions, just a private sense of accomplishment.

Thus in all six of these stories, Poe seems to suggest that to be an individual, to

stand apart from the crowd either through the courage to go where no man has gone before, physical and mental isolation, or crime, is generally to benefit. In many ways Gothic literature could be said to share this view, for there is a certain romanticism about the hero-villain who dares to be different. At the same time, however, there is the common Gothic equivocation which undermines this romantic presentation of individuals by describing their punishment and downfall in detail. Although these stories already discussed do not demonstrate this "Gothic equivocation", Poe's uncertainty about the benefits of individualism is clearly demonstrated in the stories discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. In addition, all of Poe's characters in these first 6 stories have above-average intellectual ability, a fact which seems strangely linked to their dislike of common society. It is as if their refusal to join their fellow man allows them to see things which the "mob" cannot, and to succeed where others fail. In other stories, however, Poe suggests that to refuse to join one's fellow man for any reason is inadvisable.

CHAPTER 2: THE INDIVIDUAL BECOMES THE MOB

Although in some of his stories Poe seems to celebrate the individual who stands out from the crowd, in others he is clearly uneasy about the direction in which the notion of individuality may be going. His attitude is similar to that expressed in the British Gothic novels. Although excited by social and technological changes taking place, many feared that things were moving too quickly and that it was far too easy to lose control over the often revolutionary ideas of the enlightenment. Thus in many ways Gothic became reactionary and even conservative. The same equivocal attitude is found in Poe's fiction. Having been raised not in the tradition of democratic liberalism, but by a deeply conservative Southern family who had him educated in England for a time, Poe seems to have regarded the drastic changes in the country with more than a little fear. Halliburton claims that, "Poe confronts and represents, as few authors before him, the alienated and alienating quality of the technological environment. Marx, born within a decade of Poe, discusses the same phenomenon under the heading of reification, the process through which man turns his labor, and in a sense, himself, into a thing" (247).

While at times Poe seems to enjoy contemplating possible future achievements such as space travel, he often appears uneasy about how to exercise individual will without imposing on the rest of society. Like many Gothic writers, such as Godwin in Caleb Williams, Poe questions how the dissolution of social ties caused by increasing individualism will affect the idea of community. It seems obvious that isolation was an issue which deeply concerned Poe, judging by the frequency with which it appears in his works. Although we have seen instances of individualism rewarded, Poe often writes stories in which when taken to the extreme, individuals become the mob. When people

lack social ties, they are isolated even when in the midst of others. Social anarchy is not far off, for it is difficult to control a mob of people who have nothing in common. Poe often expresses his fear of excessive individualism and his dislike for democracy in stories which take the form of social satire, such as "Mellonta Tauta", "Some Words with a Mummy", "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Devil in the Belfry". None of these stories could truly be called Gothic. In fact, they are satires in which Poe frankly displays his sharp humor and disdain for his times. They do, however, contain examples of the ambivalent reaction to progress and individualism that was often expressed in Gothic fiction. Thus although Poe is not always Gothic in form he could be called Gothic in attitude.

"The Devil in the Belfry" (1839) is an example of a society in which there is no individuality at all. It is a story about a small town in which everything is the same and nothing ever changes, at least until a stranger appears from over the hills. He takes over the belfry and makes the clock ring thirteen times instead of twelve, disrupting the daily routine of all the residents. The Dutch borough of "Vondervotteimittiss" is described by the narrator as "the finest place in the world" (248). The numerous instances of puns and wordplays in the story, however, suggest that he is to be taken less than seriously. In particular, the narrator is enamored of this tiny community because of its consistency:

By the united aid of medals, manuscripts, and inscriptions, I am enabled to say, positively, that the borough of Vondervotteimittiss has existed, from its origin, in precisely the same condition which it at present preserves...The oldest man in the borough can remember not the slightest difference in the appearance of any portion of it; and, indeed, the very suggestion of such a possibility is considered an insult. (249)

There has been no change or progress, and the inhabitants have never crossed the hills which surround the village in the belief that there cannot possibly be anything on the other side, past the limits of the microcosm they have created. This may at first seem like an

idyllic and peaceful community where there are no unpredictable events or calamities, but the ironic tone of the story undermines the narrator's glowing description from the beginning, making the reader wary of what is in store for the borough. Charles May agrees noting that, "Of course, the only reason for a Poe story to paint a state of being in which everything is regulated like clockworks and everything is as ordinary as cabbage is to break it up" (33). Thus Poe introduces the devil who comes from beyond the hills to destroy their carefully created order, beginning with the town clock.

Yet "The Devil in the Belfry" is more than a story about the benefits or drawbacks of progress. Beyond the insistence that nothing in the town has ever changed, the narrator emphasizes the uniformity of its residents:

Every house has a small garden before it, with a circular path, a sun-dial, and twenty-four cabbages. The buildings themselves are so precisely alike, that one can in no manner be distinguished from the other...There is constantly a rousing fire, and a huge pot over it, full of sauerkraut and pork, to which the good woman of the house is always busy in attending. She is a little fat old lady, with blue eyes and a red face, and wears a huge cap like a sugar-loaf, ornamented with purple and yellow ribbons...The boys themselves are, all three of them, in the garden attending the pig. They are each two feet in height...Right at the front door, in a high-backed leather-bottomed armed chair, with crooked legs and puppy feet like the tables, is seated the old man of the house himself. He is an exceedingly puffy little old gentleman, with big circular eyes and a huge double chin. (250-1)

Rather than being individuals, the citizens of Vondervotteimittiss all appear to be clones of each other, as are their houses, their pets and their gardens. Certainly on one level this story is commenting on the impossibility of stagnation and the need for progress, as well as the rather distasteful results of human conformity. Thus in agreement with the stories already discussed, Poe seems to be suggesting that individuality, a break from the crowd, is highly desirable because it gives you special abilities not available to the common man. At the same time, this story could be seen as Poe's version of democracy, a land in which

everyone is equal and nobody has more than his or her neighbor. Here, within one story, we see the two contrasting attitudes which run throughout Poe's fiction. Individuality allows one man to excel beyond others, to explore his own unique gifts. Yet the rights of the individual, such as self-rule, seem to mean for Poe that if nobody is allowed more power and privilege than another then soon everybody will be exactly the same, with little or no differentiation. Poe could be seen in this respect as being similar to Tocqueville, who felt that democracy deflated men's imaginative capability and reduced them "to smaller and better known proportions" (qtd. in Phillips 31). This diminution and homogenization leads to what Poe so scornfully refers to as "the mob", a large mass of people in which everybody is separated by their own self-interest.

"The Devil in the Belfry" is Poe's description of a village "that normally and normatively would exclude all that failed to conform to approved customs and familiar art forms" (Bachinger 515). It could be said that this is how Poe viewed his own society, which functioned according to strict rules of propriety and literary taste despite its emphasis on self-rule and individuality. Thus although Poe is denouncing a lack of originality and independence in this story, he is also pointing to the dangerous trend of individuality and democracy leading to a mob mentality.

Although Poe's opinion of modern times is generally agreed to be discernible in stories such as "Mellonta Tauta" and "Some Words With a Mummy", his ambivalence towards progress and individualism makes these stories more than the straightforward satires they first appear. In "Mellonta Tauta" (1849), Poe presents a manuscript dated 2848 supposedly found floating in a jug on the *Mare Tenebrarum*. It is a letter written by a woman called Pundita while she is undertaking a balloon journey. Pundita is fascinated by history, and relates to her friend many "amazing facts" about what the world was like a thousand years ago for the "Amriccans". Through the persona of Pundita, Poe makes

pointed remarks about many of the social and political issues of his time. If we are to take Pundita as Poe's mouthpiece, it would appear that her apparently futuristic and sophisticated society is his ideal. Pundita writes, "I rejoice, my dear friend, that we live in an age so enlightened that no such thing as an individual is supposed to exist. It is the mass for which the true Humanity cares" (685). She is also shocked at her discovery that "the ancient Amriccans *governed themselves!*---did ever anybody hear of such an absurdity?...They started with the queerest idea conceivable, viz: that all men are born free and equal--this in the very teeth of the laws of *gradation* so visibly impressed upon all things both in the moral and physical universe" (689-90). This is the same idea that is undermined in "The Devil in the Belfry" by Poe's satiric depiction of a society which has no levels of gradation, but rather complete uniformity and monotony in all aspects. Immediately after her comments on self-government, Pundita goes on to describe "a fellow of the name of Mob" who "is said to have been the most odious of all men that ever encumbered the earth. He was a giant in stature--insolent, rapacious, filthy; had the gall of a bullock with the heart of a hyena and the brains of a peacock" (690). Once again, the idea of democracy seems to lead to the idea of mob, what Miller calls "the very real dehumanizing character of man en masse" (326).

Despite his doubts about democracy, however, Poe undermines Pundita's credibility and makes her ideas seem foolish. When she tells of a man who was knocked off his ship by one of the drag lines on her balloon, she bluntly states that of course he was not permitted to get on board again. His individual life is worth nothing in comparison to the good of the others on the ship. In addition she claims that war and pestilence are positive things because they eliminate individuals. Yet if there was no such thing as an individual in her society, why would they need to be destroyed? Thus her own words are proved to be contradictory. In addition, her society is shown to be the reverse image of

American democracy. It is an aristocracy ruled by an emperor who denies the existence of individuals. Yet Pundita obviously sees herself as an individual. She sets herself apart from the other passengers on the balloon by referring to them as "some one or two hundred of the *canaille*" (684). Her contempt for others suggests that she sees herself as unique and superior. Pundita's extreme and often contradictory statements undermine her position as a knowledgeable guide. Although Poe may agree with some of her ideas about the failings of democracy, her theories are finally exaggerated to the point of ridicule. In addition, Pundita presents her society as technologically advanced by stressing, for example, the great speed of travel. Poe undermines their apparent scientific progress, however, by emphasizing their lack of knowledge of the past. Pundita claims to have accurate information about "Amricca", but her stories prove to be utterly ridiculous. In this way Poe calls into question the popular notion of progress. Rather than improving conditions, democracy is shown to have failed and society returns to an aristocracy. For all of these reasons this story is a perfect example of the reactionary Gothic attitude. Although Poe may dislike the idea of individualism, he certainly is not promoting war and pestilence or a return to the days prior to the French Revolution. Poe may use Pundita to express certain ideas about and reactions to his society, but he makes these ideas so exaggerated that they become laughable. He is both positive and negative about the possibilities of the future, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he is negative about *both* the present and the future. Poe expresses interest in the future while at the same time he reveals his fear of where the present state of things will lead. "Mellonta Tauta", meaning "these things are in the future", suggests that the individualism which had, for Poe, already become the Mob, could soon lead to a time in which war was glorified for its rapid "destruction of a myriad of individuals" which would be "so much positive advantage to the mass!" (685).

"Some Words With a Mummy" (1845) is similar in many ways to "Mellonta Tauta", although it involves going to the past instead of the future in order to comment on American times. In this story, a group of men have the opportunity through galvanism of having a conversation with an authentic Egyptian mummy, Allamistakeo. The name immediately alerts readers that once again Poe is writing tongue-in-cheek satire, and leaves them uncertain as to Poe's own stance. This story is often interpreted as a rebuttal to the modern doctrine of progress, with its faith in ultimate human perfectability (Long 3). There are numerous examples of this idea, in particular the fact that despite the centuries for which the mummy has been asleep little has changed. All of the technological achievements which the narrator and his friends offer as examples of their advanced society are nothing new to the mummy. Apparently the Egyptians did most things better thousands of years ago. Rather than progressing society seems to be moving backwards. In fact, their conversation about democracy suggests that his society had learned something long ago about which the Americans, who see democracy as an example of progress, are still sadly unaware:

We then spoke of the great beauty and importance of Democracy...He listened with marked interest, and in fact seemed not a little amused. When we had done, he said that, a great while ago, there had occurred something of a very similar sort. Thirteen Egyptian provinces determined all at once to be free, and to set a magnificent example to the rest of mankind...The thing ended, however, in the consolidation of the thirteen states, with some fifteen or twenty others, in the most odious and insupportable despotism that was ever heard of upon the face of the Earth.

I asked what was the name of the usurping tyrant.

As well as the Count could recollect, it was *Mob*. (633)

This short history of what could easily be America follows the general trend of Poe's stories. Trying to break away from England and establish a new community based on entirely different principles can be seen as a unique and daring experiment worthy of praise, similar to Poe's celebration of the individual in some of the stories already

discussed. What at first seems a worthy plan, however, ultimately fails.

Yet the Mummy's attack on progress and democracy is made questionable. Like Pundita, he is a member of the upper class and thus perhaps naturally disinclined towards democracy. Interestingly, the same could be suggested of Poe whose image of himself as an aristocratic Southerner surely influenced his political views. Despite some positive stories of unique characters who gain from their idiosyncrasy or alienation from society, Poe seems in these social satires to suggest that individualism and democracy are ideas which contain the seeds of their own destruction. When taken to their ultimate ends, they become the antithesis of everything they had intended. Yet it is difficult to determine exactly where Poe stands. The narrator claims that, "I am heartily sick of this life and of the nineteenth century in general. I am convinced that everything is going wrong" (634). Many critics take this as Poe's own view of his society. Yet once again Poe undermines his narrator, who claims that the reason for his dissatisfaction with his own times is that his wife is a shrew and he wants to know who will be president in 2045. Thus both "Mellonta Tauta" and "Some Words With a Mummy" are similar in their ambivalent attitude towards American social trends which may lead to isolation and catastrophe. According to one critic, "Whether he spins the clock a thousand years forward or several thousand backwards, Poe looks upon the Great American Experience from a perspective which makes it seem vulgar, trivial, self-defeating" (Hoffman 196). Although "The Devil in the Belfry", "Mellonta Tauta" and "Some Words With a Mummy" may be satire, they share with the Gothic an uneasiness about social trends and a desire to comment on them.

So far Poe's tales of social criticism have described a fictional Dutch borough, the distant future and the distant past. Yet perhaps the most haunting representation of Poe's unease about the individual gradually becoming subsumed by the mob is "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). Acclaimed by critics as a masterpiece of description, both of the city and

its crowds, it tells the story of two solitary men who exist in the midst of great hordes of people and yet experience no human interaction. In particular, the old man whom the narrator follows seems anxious to join in human fellowship and yet is unable to do so: "He is almost a foreshadowing of the individual dehumanized and lost in the mass, of whom twentieth-century authors have written so frequently" (Buranelli 74).

The story begins with the narrator, who is sitting in a London coffee house. He reveals that he is recovering from ill health, and thus the reader may assume that he has been out of society for some time. For this reason he seeks the company of others in a crowded area, and greatly enjoys being in the midst of his fellow men: "I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in everything", he says, and goes on to describe how he amuses himself "in observing the promiscuous company in the room" (308). Yet for all of the people who surround him, the narrator is strikingly alone. As time passes, he turns his attention from inside the shop to the street outside, which he describes as "one of the principal thoroughfares of the city and had been very much crowded during the whole day. But, as the darkness came on, the throng momentarily increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door" (308). Apparently the narrator has been sitting in the coffee house the whole day, as if afraid to leave the company of others and return home alone. Individuality does not appear to be a particularly enjoyable state for this character, who is described as an exile, a guest without a host, unhappily alone (Grunes 352). The epigraph, "Ce grand malheur, de ne pouvoir etre seul", from La Bruyere suggests that the narrator as much as the old man has the misfortune of not being able to be alone. Although he describes his mood as a happy one, this seems to be the result of finally being in the company of others again after a long period of solitude. Even while amongst others, however, the narrator is still alone.

The narrator first spots the old man as he is absorbed in observing the passers-by.

He notes them only generally at first, and then gradually in more detail, dividing them into class and occupation based on their appearances. Apparently all people are of an easily recognizable "type" to this man, and not individuals at all. This changes, however, when he sees the old man:

With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age)--a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression. Any thing even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before. (311)

This old man at first seems to be an extraordinary individual, who transcends the endlessly passing crowd. The lonely narrator feels he must have a unique and wild history to stand out from the crowd in such a way, and he instantly decides he wants to know more about him, to understand him. In his isolation the narrator appears to crave human company and conversation, and thus decides to follow the old man and learn his story. Yet the narrator fails to comprehend the impossibility of ever truly knowing another human being in the vast crowd, for we are limited by what we see and what the strangers choose to reveal to us. Genuine human communion seems impossible in an age which could produce a crowd in which people "talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around" (309). It almost seems as if the narrator wants to *know* the old man inside and out, to *be* him in a sense. Certainly for a lonely man who blends in apparently unnoticed with the crowd in the coffee house, there could be something appealing in being a man so unique that others single you out of the passing mob.

Yet the narrator's romanticized view of the old man is gradually revealed as he follows the stranger for an entire day. The old man seems to be desperately searching for fellow human beings, for he is uncertain and halting when there is a lull in the crowd, and

only becomes rejuvenated when he is in the midst of the throng. Despite his enjoyment of company, however, he reacts violently when he is accidentally touched by one of the passers-by. Like the narrator, he is alone in the crowd and enjoys no contact with others by whom he is surrounded. The narrator discovers this when, tired of shadowing the old man, he confronts him: "I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation" (314). His fears of solitude are confirmed at this moment, for he is reduced to non-existence as the old man passes him by as if he is *nothing* to be noticed. In return, the narrator concludes that the old man is "the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the Man of the Crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds" (314). Thus unable to decipher him, to truly know or understand another human being, the narrator imposes a reading and an identity on him, reducing his once unique status to another generalized specimen. Although he once stood out from the crowd because of his unusual face, he is soon reduced to being merely the "type" of crime, the man of the crowd, a representative of the city's enigma. In fact, the narrator associates the old man with evil from his first glimpse of him. This seems to be part of the attraction for the narrator. The criminal could be considered the most radical of individuals, as I have shown in my discussion in "The Cask of Amontillado" and as I will demonstrate later in the section on "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat". The narrator, in his loneliness, perhaps longs for some means of standing out from the crowd of nameless individuals.

Several critics turn to this story as an example of Poe's views of individualism and democracy. Ziff, for example, states that "Poe, quite simply, regarded democracy as a mistake, the most vicious manifestation of which was a mob now unloosed from wholesome restraint" (583), and suggests that he believed in the restoration of hierarchical

social controls. In society as depicted in "The Man of the Crowd", each man lives a double life of what Byer calls community and privacy: "Each pedestrian bears the haunting, almost erotic interest of community, of common destiny, and, at the same time, is unreadable in the privacy of his interests, potentially dangerous and anticomunal" (226). The crowd, in its undifferentiated masses, gives the illusion of homogeneity and equality because few stand out, but in reality it is made up of private and self-interested individuals. The narrator's elaborate attempts to divide the passers-by into types and classes only serves to further diminish any distinctiveness the strangers might have. This is precisely the contradiction which seems to worry Poe in the stories already discussed. Individualism may be beneficial, but too many individuals leads to a mob in which human contact is virtually impossible. Monika Elbert links Poe's ideas to those of Alexis de Tocqueville, who critiqued individuality and equality in American democracy because he felt that they led to a lack of uniqueness and dignity as all people were viewed the same, and to a loss of social links and fraternal feeling which existed in aristocratic society. Elbert notes that "Tocqueville's thinking is similar to contemporary Whig thinking" (18), and that Poe was a Whig who favored *interdependence* rather than *independence*. Elbert also recognizes Poe's fundamental Gothic oscillation when she states that "If we see Poe's stories as a critique of both Democratic and Whig policy, we find a Poe who affirms and negates the values of both at the same time" (19). Ultimately Poe does critique both in stories such as "Mellonta Tauta", for if the equality and individuality of democracy are dangerous, so is the egoism and selfishness of aristocracy. "The option to being the eccentric individual in society, the egoist in Tocqueville's terms, is to be the anonymous individual in the crowd, cut off from all familial connections; this is, of course, equally horrific" (Elbert 25). As Poe had explored the benefits of individualism, as well as the dangers of equality and democracy, he also in a third group of stories depicts the

loneliness, self-destruction and madness that result from this egoism and often self-imposed alienation ascribed by Elbert to the aristocrat.

CHAPTER 3: REACTION TO "RADICAL INDIVIDUALISM"

Poe, who "seems never to have questioned the hierarchy of social classes which was especially marked in Virginia" (Hoffman 199), may have explored the faults of democracy in several of his stories, but those which are critically accepted as his most "Gothic" are those in which he examines the role of the disinherited aristocrat. These characters generally provide no information about their ancestry or birthplace, except to hint that they are of noble lineage, as if they are completely cut off from human consideration. Alone not only due to lack of family ties, many of these characters are described as men of excessive sensibility: "artist-heroes possessed of super-human insight, at odds with the world, withdrawn into a symbolic, crumbling castle" (Rans 71). Certainly men such as Egaeus or Roderick Usher can be seen as examples of extreme self-reliance, but in Poe self-reliance is not romanticized as it was by other authors of his time. Levine notes that "in Poe the rejection of society usually does not include the glorification of a kind of bohemian existence. If his narrator is out of touch, he is in the lonely and isolated House of Usher" (xxii). Although in some of the previously discussed stories characters may have gained material or public success for their individuality, the majority of Poe's tales do not reward or venerate the state of alienation and isolation experienced by the character, although it is often portrayed as inevitable. This mixed reaction to individualism is typical of Gothic fiction: "There is a basic ambivalence in the attitude of the gothic writers to the alienation which they perceive. On the one hand, their fiction projects a fear of the solitude which is the price of freedom; and on the other hand, an almost hysterical attack on all institutions which might inhibit that freedom or mitigate the solitude it breeds" (Fiedler 131). In Poe, this reaction takes the form of the numerous

characters who are inhabitants of a closed world which eventually becomes a tomb.

Whether intentionally or not, the characters in many of Poe's stories become secluded, cut off from reality, and the results are devastating.

Many of Poe's alienated heroes seem to be so through little fault of their own. They are naturally inclined to be different from the rest of society due to a heightened sensibility, madness, or a sense of superiority to others that leads them to shun human companionship. These innate qualities cause the hero's death or downfall in all of the stories, most notably in "Berenice", "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". Egaeus, the narrator of "Berenice" (1835), explains immediately to the reader the ways in which he is different from the ordinary man: "My baptismal name is Egaeus, that of my family I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more time-honoured than my gloomy, grey, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries; and in many striking particulars...there is more than sufficient evidence to warrant the belief" (146). Although his family is unique in the land Egaeus sets himself apart even from this family. By refusing to name them, Egaeus suggests he is not a part of them but rather totally alone. He then emphasizes how alone he is by describing his childhood, spent isolated in the family library. Gradually this seclusion has an effect on his character:

It is singular, that as years rolled away, and the noon of manhood found me still in the mansion of my fathers--it is wonderful what stagnation there fell upon the springs of my life--wonderful how total an inversion took place in the character of my commonest thought. The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, not the material of my every-day existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself. (146)

Although this sounds strikingly like Dupin's style of living, the consequences are much more severe for Egaeus. The library in which he cloisters himself becomes reality for him. While his cousin, Berenice, is active and outgoing he lives wholly "within my own heart"

(146), a dangerous place to be confined for most Gothic heroes.

Eventually Berenice falls ill with a fatal disease which causes changes in her habits, character and appearance, and "disturb[s] even the identity of her person" (147). Egaeus too, however, develops a sort of illness which is described as "an irritability of the 'attentive' properties of mind, that nervous *intensity of interest* with which, in my case, the powers of meditation...busied and buried themselves, in the contemplation of even the most ordinary objects of the universe" (147). He soon begins to spend hours fascinated with some simple object, passing whole days or nights studying an inconsequential phenomenon. More and more he becomes cut off from the world.

It is at this period of his withdrawal from reality, however, that Egaeus begins to pay attention to Berenice, who previously had existed for him only peripherally as a shadow or a dream. Denying any passion of the heart, he nevertheless proposes to her in what he calls "an evil moment", suggesting it is out of pity for the ailing Berenice, whom he knows is in love with him. It seems as though in his gradual slipping away from society Egaeus is seeking some sort of companionship, although in his fear of what Day called the "Other" he chooses the sick and wasted Berenice who apparently has little identity left with which to threaten Egaeus. Soon after their engagement, Berenice suddenly appears before Egaeus in his private library one day. He quickly becomes preoccupied with her appearance, fixating on her teeth in particular, and commenting that "a sense of insufferable anxiety oppressed me" (149). Psychoanalytical critics such as Marie Bonaparte suggest that this is clearly anxiety about his impending marriage manifesting itself through a fear of being eaten alive as it were (218). Halliburton agrees, explaining that Egaeus is "replacing a true object of desire or fear with a surrogate object, and changing the true object into a more manageable form" (202). Thus his obsession with her teeth allows his attention to be distracted from Berenice herself, who is now a threat to his

identity as a solitary recluse and visionary. After she leaves the room, Egaeus cannot drive from his mind the image of what he describes as "the white and ghastly *spectrum* of the teeth" (150). They become the new subject of his monomania, effectively reducing Berenice from woman and intended wife to a mere object, another "trifle" to be contemplated. Thus despite his betrothal, Egaeus is able to remain as solitary and unreachable as he was before, refusing to let the loving Berenice into his private space.

Although "diseased" before in his relatively harmless contemplations, Egaeus soon becomes completely and dangerously deranged as his obsession with her teeth grows: "I shuddered as I assigned to them, in imagination, a sensitive and sentient power, and even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression...of Berenice I more seriously believed que tous ses dents etaient des idees...ah, *therefore* it was that I coveted them so madly! I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason" (150). Again it appears that Egaeus' fear of any sort of human relationship means that he must possess her, this object, to own her in order to regain his own health at the cost of her own.

Berenice is pronounced dead only two days after she sees him in the library, as if his refusal to accept her as a real person has destroyed her identity completely. In reality, however, Berenice has been buried alive after suffering some sort of epileptic fit. Even believing her dead, however, Egaeus is not satisfied. In a state of what he calls "a confused and exciting dream" (151), Egaeus unearths the actually still-living Berenice and extracts all of her teeth, putting them in a box in his library. The servants hear Berenice's screams and the deeds of Egaeus are discovered, along with his madness. Although he may likely be punished or imprisoned, Egaeus has managed to retain his isolation from society. Berenice has been reduced to a box of teeth in his possession, where she can no longer cause any threat to his solitude. Poe apologized for what he called the

"grotesqueness" of this story of impromptu dental surgery (see Quinn 210), although perhaps the most grotesque thing about it is the image of the terrified Egaeus, clinging to his privacy to the point of insanity.

"William Wilson" (1839) provides another example of a character who desperately tries to be individual and unique with disastrous results. From his opening words in which he describes his name as, "an object for the scorn--for the horror--for the detestation of my race. To the uttermost regions of the globe have not the indignant words bruited its unparalleled infamy? Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned!" (277), Wilson seems to be trying to portray himself as unrivaled in infamy, surpassing the rest of humanity. This hyperbolic view of his own deeds is continued as he describes how "from comparatively trivial wickedness I passed, with the stride of a giant, into more than the enormities of an Elah-Gabalus" (277). Even before telling his tale, Wilson insists that "although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never *thus*, at least, tempted before-- certainly, never *thus* fell" (278). Like the fisherman of Lofoden, Wilson stresses that the events he is about to recount are extraordinary and they place him beyond ordinary humanity. Unfortunately, the results are more devastating for Wilson than for the old fisherman.

Wilson, like Egaeus, points out that he is by birth and by nature unsuited for common life: "I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable" (278). This family disposition seems especially pronounced for William, however, who describes himself as self-willed and capricious, controlling his weak-minded parents from a young age: "My voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions" (278).

This self-government, as it often does in Poe, leads to a downfall. At first Wilson is happy in his school, where he uses his unique personality to gain ascendancy over the rest of his school mates. For a time, his individuality allows him to benefit and be successful among others. Soon, however, there arrives at the school a second William Wilson, (hereafter called Wilson2), who becomes Wilson's rival in all things and even mimics his behavior and speech. Rather than simply having a competitor Wilson seems especially angered by having a "double", as if the newcomer's similarity to him suggests that all men are really the same and that he is in no way unique. In particular, Wilson is irritated that their names are identical. Of his own name he says that "I had always felt aversion to my uncourtly patronymic, and its very common, if not plebeian praenomen" (282), suggesting that his name is suitable for "the mob" (280). Although he frequently reminds the reader that he is of noble descent, Wilson apparently fears that he will be mistaken for a commoner when he wants to be an aristocrat. The added fact of having his already prosaic name shared by another student makes it even more difficult for Wilson to stand out amongst his schoolmates as he is desperately trying to do. Wilson explains that he fears he and Wilson2 will be confused by other students, and relates that already there are rumors circulating among the upper classes that the two boys are brothers. Wilson2 then adds insult to injury, in Wilson's mind, by beginning to copy or mimic him: "His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part" (283). Wilson is infuriated by this, for Wilson2 already shares his name, his date of birth, his height and even a similarity of features.

As his rival begins to intrude on his individuality more and more, Wilson's vexation becomes more intense. He appears to be particularly irritated by the fact that he has a double, for it in some way suggests that if two men can be the same then he is no longer unique in any way. Wilson thus is driven to violate moral and social laws, as if in an effort

to stand out from the crowd once again. Although Wilson² is only too happy to offer advice Wilson refuses to heed it, preferring to exercise once again his own self-will. He admits, however, that "I might, today, have been a better and thus a happier man, had I less frequently rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then but too cordially hated and too bitterly despised" (283). He seems to believe that his ruin has come as a result of his isolation, of his refusal to accept help from others in his insistence on standing alone. Upon his departure from Dr. Bransby's school, Wilson throws himself furiously into what he calls vice and folly, drinking at Eton and cheating at Oxford. Trying to stand out from the crowd through depravity, Wilson acknowledges that "I spurned even the common restraints of decency in the mad infatuation of my revels...Let it suffice, that I out-Heroded Herod, and that, giving name to a multitude of novel follies, I added no brief appendix to the long catalogue of vices then usual in the most dissolute university of Europe" (286-7). It is as if notoriety provides for Wilson an identity which is his alone, and hopefully one which cannot be shared with another person.

Yet Wilson² appears wherever his namesake goes, trying to dissuade him from his sins to the extent that most critics assign him the role of Wilson's conscience personified. Certainly Wilson² materializes at the most inopportune moments, foiling Wilson's plans of lust, revenge and ambition and thus depriving him of an identity as a profligate criminal. Desperate to shake his double, Wilson finally confronts him at the Roman Carnival where Wilson² arrives to stop his intended seduction of Duke Di Broglio's young wife. Dressed in identical costumes, it does seem that Wilson can have no individual identity from his old 'rival'. Unable to bear being anticipated in everything he does, Wilson resolves to be free from Wilson² forever, and plunges his sword into his double's bosom.

Although the story is often read in such a way as to suggest that Wilson has actually stabbed himself, this is not precisely what happens: "A large mirror,--so at first it

seemed to me in my confusion--now stood where none had been perceptible before; and as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait. Thus it appeared, I say, but was not. it was my antagonist--it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution" (292). Wilson2 may have been destroyed but the result is not the total freedom which Wilson had longed for. Instead, Wilson2's words suggest that Wilson has actually destroyed himself: "You have conquered, and I yield. Yet henceforward art thou also dead--dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist--and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself" (292). Without his double Wilson is totally alone in the world, for his behavior has certainly rendered him friendless. This state of solitude and complete individuality which Wilson was driven to achieve is ultimately his destruction. Levine suggests that "Not only does Wilson II represent the codes of society which William I persists in flaunting, he also represents William I's human ties to that society. When Wilson I kills him, he cuts the cords which bind him to humanity" (192). He then elaborates, "Wilson has committed Hawthorne's unpardonable sin, or at least that portion of it which involves pride and isolation. Like Ethan Brand, he has tried to set himself off from humanity" (193). Wilson's 'constitutional' tendency to self-government and detachment have apparently literally cost him his life. Unable to accept a life in which he is not pre-eminent and superior to all others, Wilson devotes his entire career to breaking away from others through sin and crime until he is even more of an outcast than he was at first. The state of radical individualism he achieves, however, is a cause for his retrospective remorse and, according to Wilson2, his complete downfall.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) is likely Poe's most famous story, and certainly his most critically debated. Interpretations vary widely from reading the story as

a parody of popular Gothic novels to identifying it as an extended metaphor of the mind, depicting the narrator's "journey into the darkest, most hidden regions of himself; and the fearful tableau therein enacted is a fable of his destiny dredged up from the regions of his deepest, most archaic dreams" (Hoffman 302). Perhaps what most draws critics to this story is the wide variety of interpretations possible, for it can be read on many different levels and argued in many different directions. Rather than focusing on the relationship between the narrator and Usher, however, as many critics do, I wish to closely examine Usher himself. Even more than Egaeus and William Wilson, Roderick Usher is the epitome of the isolated Gothic hero who has been separated from the world for so long that he can never rejoin it. The only avenues open to him appear to be madness and death.

The story begins with the narrator's description of the house as he approaches. Coming from the outside, 'normal' world, it seems unbearably dreary to the narrator: "I looked upon the scene before me--upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain--upon the bleak walls--upon the vacant eye-like windows--upon a few rank sedges--and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees--with an utter depression of soul" (263). The narrator has received a letter from Roderick Usher, a childhood friend who is now suffering from "nervous agitation". Usher asks the narrator "as his best and indeed his only personal friend" (263) to come and visit in the hopes that some company will alleviate his malady. The narrator describes Usher at some length, noting in particular that "his reserve had been always excessive and habitual" (263-4). In fact the narrator admits that he really knows little of his friend although "he had been one of my boon companions in boyhood" and that "we had been even intimate associates" (263). Like Egaeus and Wilson, Usher's family has always been regarded as peculiar, a trait which Usher seems to have inherited. At more length, the narrator goes on to explain that "the stem of the Usher race...had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the

entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variations, so lain" (264). The entire family can be seen as being disconnected from society. Usher himself is the last of the line. With no descendants he is utterly alone and thus tries to latch on to an old friend in order to save himself from complete isolation.

Usher is certainly psychologically isolated due to his reserve, but he is also physically isolated within the house which appears totally cut off from the rest of the world. The narrator must pass through the dreary countryside to reach the house, and cross a causeway above a black tarn in order to get inside. Once through the doors, he describes how "a valet, of stealthy step, then conducted me, in silence, through the many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the *studio* of his master" (265). Usher himself is enclosed within the depths of the house in a sort of vacuum of inescapable seclusion which his cry for help from the narrator suggests is no longer totally voluntary. The fact that he is suffering from an illness which is described as "a constitutional and a family evil" which takes the form of "a morbid acuteness of the senses" (266) supports this. Unable to bear food, odors, light and sound, for example, he is virtually confined in his dark and lonely chambers which Rans describes as "a remote and ruined palace of art, filled with things of beauty in tatters and disarray" (80). Usher will soon involuntarily be even more alone, for he informs his friend of "the evidently approaching dissolution--of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth" (267). Madeline is gradually wasting away, and Roderick lives constantly in a state of fear realizing that her death will leave him totally alone. Thus it seems that both temperament and fate are conspiring to render him isolated.

The narrator tries his best to entertain Usher, painting and reading with him in an effort to draw him out and elevate his spirits. Ultimately he seems to despair of accomplishing this, revealing that "as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more

unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom" (268). Even though the two apparently are able to communicate with each other, nothing can draw Roderick back into society. He has been virtually alone for so long he is not able to break free from the shell which exists around him. When he suddenly informs the narrator that Madeline has died, his mental stability falters even more. The narrator thus decides to humour Usher, who has lost his last relative, and allow him to entomb Madeline within the house for a fortnight.

Of course, Madeline proves not to be dead quite yet, a fact of which Usher was fully aware. This leads many critics to question why he voluntarily puts his own sister living into the tomb. The story itself suggests a 'reasonable' explanation. After having encoffined Madeline and placing her in a vault which "was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light" (272), the narrator notices "a striking similitude between the brother and sister". He continues, "Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them" (272). We have seen William Wilson's reaction to having a double, and many critics point to the fact that Madeline is effectually Usher's double. She is merely a mirror of Roderick. Destroying his twin secures once and for all his own individualism, a state he seems to both long for and dread. At the same time, killing Madeline brings about his own destruction, and ends what for Usher appears to be intolerable but unsolvable loneliness. By entombing the living Madeline and locking her behind the huge iron door of the house, Usher is also burying himself.

Gargano suggests that "The Fall of the House of Usher" portrays "the

predetermined collapse of separateness and identity into unity" (53), a unity which for Poe could only come through death. Usher, according to Gargano, is "a tormented soul adrift in a universe no longer stable or comprehensible" (54). Because he lives in a dying world of vacancy, decay and disorder he can have no other destination than death, which "annihilates difference, discreteness, and human separateness" (57), as Poe describes in "Eureka". Thus having been completely isolated for many years within his house, Usher has become a radical individual with no human ties. This separation means that he must be destroyed in order to return to the original state Poe called the "One", from which men had been forced into "the abnormal condition of Many" (Eureka 207). The story can thus be read as a critique of characters who "withdraw from life in its conventional aspects, into heavily draped rooms with artificial lighting...and there they cultivate a life of their own, so distinct and cut apart from the world that they lose all touch with reality" (Galloway 42). Unfortunately for Roderick Usher, this divorcement from reality was not voluntary or the result of some punishable sin. Instead he is one of the most tragic of Poe's alienated heroes, doomed by heredity and fate to isolation and eventually to destruction.

Other characters in Poe are isolated through their own search for some sort of knowledge or revelation which leads them away from society as they pursue their solipsistic quest. These stories, such as "Ms Found in a Bottle", "Morella" and "Ligeia", deal with that ever-popular figure in Gothic literature, the seeker of forbidden knowledge, or the "over-reacher" as he is frequently called. In "MS Found in a Bottle" (1833), the narrator tells of a terrifying journey to some unknown land from which he will likely never return. The story opens, like many of Poe's stories, with the narrator's renunciation of any social ties: "Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill-usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other" (128). This is a man

with no country or family or friends. He goes on to describe his unusual education which has rendered him a genius with little imagination, predisposed to science rather than superstition. Although this insistence on his rationality gives a level of credibility to the story he is about to tell, May believes that "Given the nature of the incredible experience the narrator recounts, this preface is not simply an example of Poe's use of the eighteenth-century convention of establishing credibility, but rather his use of the nineteenth-century thematic convention of presenting a rationalist point of view as a crime that must be expiated by an assault of the imagination itself" (22-3). The narrator's inclination toward science and rationality lead him to believe that everything can be explained through "physical philosophy". His belief that he is more intelligent than others and that even the mysteries of the world can be unraveled by him is a dangerous one in the Gothic. His words of self-praise come close to the hubris which ultimately destroys the Gothic over-reacher, such as Vathek or Frankenstein. In fact Smith details the similarities between Poe's tale and Shelley's Frankenstein, noting that Walton, Frankenstein and Poe's narrator all claim to be men of science and intellect who feel that the promise of discovery outweighs any fear of danger (37). Thus the narrator's attempt to set himself apart from his family, his country and his fellow men leaves him vulnerable to retribution which comes in the form of an extraordinary experience that virtually destroys him.

The narrator describes the years he has spent in foreign travel, wandering the world alone much as Melmoth did. He then decides to sail on a voyage to the Archipelago of the Sunda Islands, "having no other inducement than a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted me as a fiend" (129). Having no social ties, he is unable to settle down and thus wanders aimlessly. While on board the ship they are hit by a violent storm, of which the narrator and an old Swede are the only survivors. The two men travel south for five days, at which point the sun sets and never rises again, leaving the two men

traveling in darkness. By this time the story has taken on apocalyptic tones, and the journey has become something more than a mere sea voyage. Critics have described it as a "journey of the soul" (Hoffman 148) and a movement through terrors "toward a deeper knowledge" (Halliburton 247). It becomes clear that although the two men do not know what day it is or where they are, they are aware "of having made farther to the southward than any previous navigators" (131). This sounds strikingly similar to Walton's ambition to sail north in Frankenstein. Although perhaps the narrator did not consciously set out on this journey with the intention of exceeding ordinary limits, he is determined to survive and discover what will lie at the end of it. According to Feidelson, "the secret aim of his journey, hidden from his own conscious thought, is the creation of a new world by the destruction of the old" (71-2). Eventually he hopes to find a new reality, which can only come at the loss of his own identity through death.

As his voyage progresses, the narrator becomes more and more isolated. He begins the story with no family or country but soon finds his total isolation terrifying. Sucked into the storm's black abyss, he is alone on the sea which he describes as a "desert of ebony" (131). Soon he loses the company of the old Swede as well when their boat sinks. The narrator, however, is thrown on board a gigantic ship which appears in front of them. At first it seems that he has found some company, for the ship has a large crew of rather mysterious looking men. The narrator tries to avoid detection at first by concealing himself, but soon he comes forward only to discover that nobody even sees him: "Incomprehensible men! Wrapped up in meditations of a kind which I cannot divine, they pass by me unnoticed. Concealment is utter folly on my part, for the people *will not* see" (133). Finally coming to a state in which he would welcome some companionship for this horrifying journey, the narrator finds himself unable to communicate with the only other people available. He goes on to relate how "about an hour ago, I made bold to trust

myself among a group of the crew. They paid me no manner of attention, and, although I stood in the very midst of them all, seemed utterly unconscious of my presence" (134).

This state of radical isolation soon leads the once skeptical and rational narrator to become a "terrified victim of gothic effects" (Saliba 109). Much like "The Man of the Crowd", he is alone amongst a group of people with whom communication is impossible.

Despite his terror, however, the narrator shows great curiosity about the crew and their purpose. He describes their ancient instruments and the unusual material of the ship itself, finally admitting that "a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge--some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction" (135-6). He believes they are headed for the Southern pole, and is eager to discover what lies beyond even if the price is his death. The crew also is described as having "upon their countenance and expression more of the eagerness of hope than of the apathy of despair" (136). Despite his intentions for a harmless voyage the narrator's extreme individualism and isolation, combined with his ambition to go where no man has gone before in order to plumb the mysteries of nature, make him a good example of the Gothic over-reacher or seeker of forbidden knowledge who renounces any ties to humanity in order to satisfy his own curiosity. Eventually the ship begins to spin "in immense concentric circles" around "the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance" (136). Thus the narrator is sucked down into the abyss where he will discover the truth of the secret he is seeking, although unlike the lucky narrator of "A Descent Into the Maelstrom", there is no indication that he will survive. His quest for knowledge has been completed at the cost of his own life.

The narrator of "Morella" (1835) is more fortunate in that he does not die,

although the events which he recounts have left him in a devastated state close to madness. He begins the story describing his love for Morella, although he insists that "my soul from our first meeting, burned with fires it had never before known; but the fires were not of Eros" (152). In many ways he appears similar to the narrator of "Berenice" who refuses to entangle himself in any human relationship, preferring his own company. Yet he marries Morella apparently without thinking of love or passion. The reason for this marriage is suggested when he explains that "Morella's erudition was profound. As I hope to live, her talents were of no common order--her powers of mind were gigantic" (152). He claims that he happily became her pupil, "abandoning myself implicitly to the guidance of my wife, and entered with an unflinching heart into the intricacies of her studies" (152).

Although at first his presentation of the events seems reasonable, soon the reader may begin to suspect that he is another of Poe's unreliable narrators who carefully controls the story in order to present himself in a more favorable light and justify his behavior. He refuses to admit that he has any interest in Morella's teachings and protests that he only follows her studies through habit and example. Yet certainly he has control over his own course of study. Apparently the narrator, despite his fear of intimacy suggested by his denial of any romantic feeling for his wife, is willing to attach himself to Morella because she will be useful to him. Her great learning enables him to examine "forbidden pages", and to explore areas of knowledge which would have remained closed to him without a teacher. Yet eventually this exciting search for enlightenment becomes disturbing to the narrator. Perhaps because Morella "shunned society, and, attach[ed] herself to me alone" (152), the narrator soon loses any of the enjoyment he once received from his wife and her lessons: "There fell a shadow on my soul...and thus, joy suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnon became Ge-Henna" (152). He begins to despise his wife, as if he is afraid of her and what she has taught him. Like

Egeus, he seemingly cannot bear the closeness of marriage and thus reacts against Morella. He describes how soon the mystery of her manner begins to oppress him, for he cannot understand and control one who is so intellectually advanced. He thus begins to long for her death when he discovers that although she may open up avenues of knowledge for him her willingness to surrender her individuality and personal identity to her husband threaten his own individuality.

The notion of personal identity is one of Morella's primary areas of interest. She spends much time exploring what distinguishes one man from another, and is particularly intrigued by "the notion of that identity *which at death is or is not lost for ever*" (153). As she grows ill and closer to death, she vows to her husband "her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore" (154), and warns him that he will live the rest of his life in sorrow for his refusal to love her. Her prophecy is fulfilled when the child she bears at the moment of her death becomes the focus of the narrator's life. Identical to Morella in many ways the child "grew strangely in stature and intellect, and was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed, and I loved her with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth" (154). Although Morella chose to devote her life to her husband, the narrator now encloses his child within "the rigorous seclusion of my home" (154), unnaturally cloistering her from the world. For ten years she remains nameless, referred to only as "my child" and "my love" as if she is only his possession and has no identity in her own right. In this way he is able to accomplish what he failed to with his wife. He has a companion who can in no way threaten his individual identity, for essentially the child has no identity of her own.

Before long, however, the narrator learns that his attempts to exploit Morella for her knowledge and to destroy both her will and that of her daughter will be punished. Morella's superior volition apparently continues to exist even after her death, for her

consciousness survives in her child. When the narrator decides to have the child baptized, he chooses the name of Morella. Upon whispering the name, he is horrified by the result: "What more than fiend convulsed the features of my child, and overspread them with hues of death, as starting at that scarcely audible sound, she turned her glassy eyes from the earth to heaven, and falling prostrate on the black slabs of our ancestral vault, responded--'I am here!'" (155). His beloved child dead, Morella's prediction comes true with a vengeance. Her final reprisal comes when, bearing the body of his deceased child to the family tomb, he discovers within no trace of the first Morella. Her will and identity have proven unconquerable by the narrator's selfish quest for knowledge and isolation, and he is left to bitterly ponder his error for years to come. He describes the wearisome life he is now forced to lead: "the hemlock and the cypress overshadowed me night and day. And I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my fate faded from heaven, and therefore the earth grew dark, and its figures passed by me like flitting shadows" (155). Thus the narrator's attempt to become Morella's equal in erudition leaves him in a state of despair close to madness.

"Ligeia" (1838) can be seen as a continuation and elaboration of many of the ideas which "Morella" suggests. Ligeia, like Morella, is associated with knowledge as the narrator describes her "rare learning" (222). He relates that he cannot remember where he first met her, and suspects that he never knew her paternal name. Thus like many of the narrators in Poe's stories, Ligeia is virtually without a past. She is a mystery to the narrator, who calls her unsurpassed, incomprehensible and a shadow (222). Even her beauty is unusual. In particular the narrator is enthralled by the beauty of her eyes, or more specifically by their strange expression: "What was it--that something more profound than the well of Democritus--which lay far within the pupils of my beloved. What *was* it? I was possessed with a passion to discover" (224). He longs for full

knowledge of their expression and believes that they will reveal to him some great secret if only he can fathom them. In many ways this narrator is similar to the one of "MS Found in a Bottle", for he is about to learn some secret which will ultimately mean destruction. He believes the source of this knowledge lies in her eyes which, according to Gross, are "reflective of the dark currents of knowledge she possesses. Ligeia is the bearer of secrets and the narrator undergoes the Gothic quest in search of these mysteries" (40).

As in "Morella", the narrator is attracted to Ligeia because of her learning, which he feels is unequalled by either man or woman. According to him, "I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child like confidence, to her guidance" (225). Despite this claim for submission, it seems that he really hopes to *surpass* Ligeia. Despite Heller's claim that Ligeia is vampiric, feeding spiritually and physically upon both the narrator and Rowena (119-20), I feel that the struggle between Ligeia and the narrator is more a battle for supremacy than the one-sided domination described by Heller. Voloshin agrees, describing the struggle for ascendancy between Ligeia and the narrator, "who in their extreme isolation comprise a world unto themselves. Each struggles for complete knowledge and possession of the other" (24). Full knowledge of the other, according to Voloshin, would mean "a divinization of the self and the obliteration of the other" (25). In any case, for a time the narrator does submit to Ligeia in order to reap the benefits of her knowledge. She facilitates what he describes as "that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden" (225). His goal is thus transgression.

The nature of this transgression is made clear when he links Ligeia to a quotation from Joseph Glanvill: "And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by

nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" (224). This quotation suggests that man could be a god if only the power of his will is strong enough. It is through this idea that the narrator hopes to attain his forbidden knowledge:

The passage from Glanvill is the key, the psychic formula, which he hopes may open to him the very mystery of being...From this psychic formula derives, then, the megalomania that he can by power of will become godlike, blending his spirit with the universal spirit of deity symbolized in the divine Ligeia, who possesses in apotheosis all the attributes of his own wish, extended in a symbolic ideal beyond the touch of mortality and raised to the absoluteness of deity. (Basler 55)

Ligeia, like Morella, soon grows ill. She seems to be wasting away, as if the more the narrator grows in knowledge the more Ligeia is reduced. She struggles against this, however, and reveals through a poem her desire to conquer death, "the worm", and to share in God's great will by transforming the course of nature. The narrator portrays himself as stunned by her "assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known" (226), although it seems that he is more distraught by the prospect of losing the teacher who might open up areas of knowledge which would render him god-like than at the thought of losing his wife.

After her death, the narrator describes his lonely life. Without Ligeia he is unable to pursue the great secret he felt he was on the verge of learning. Yet despite his grief, he settles down a few months later with a new bride in a new house. Rowena does not possess the depths of knowledge he revered in Ligeia, and he admits of his new bride that "I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (229). More and more he becomes obsessed with the memory of his former wife, until he loses all control of his life and becomes addicted to opium. The departed Ligeia still appears to have the power to destroy his life, as if in retribution for her own demise. Finally her gigantic

Finally her gigantic volition is apparently able to drag her back from death into the body of the ailing Rowena, although certain qualifications in the story do allow for a less supernatural reading. Rather than being overjoyed at the return of his wife, however, the narrator is terrified when "Ligeia returns as an alien figure that forebodes destructive aggression in her new form" (Saliba 216). It does not appear that there will be a loving reunion between the two, for Ligeia has regained control of her will and her identity which the narrator sought to make his own. The narrator's search for forbidden knowledge has ended, for he now has final proof of the powers of the will although this knowledge seizes him with "inexpressible madness" (233). Like the narrator of "Morella" he is virtually destroyed by his desperate search for truths best left hidden and his attempts to surpass human limits. The characters in all three of these stories separate themselves from the rest of humanity by striving to cross the physical or metaphysical boundaries which contain the rest of mankind.

While the narrators of the previous three stories dared to cross the forbidden boundaries of knowledge which limit mankind, the next two tales are examples of men who try to create boundaries around themselves in order to keep out the community at large. "The Masque of the Red Death" is likely the most recognized story of this type, but it was preceded by a shorter tale on the same theme. "Shadow.--A Parable" was first published in 1835, a full seven years before "Masque". Yet it anticipates it in describing how "an enclosed space that is at first positively protective becomes a claustrophobic site of death" (Halliburton 316).

The story begins with the narrator, Oinos, describing a time in which plagues were widespread. Foreseeing the evil approaching, Oinos and some of his companions enclose themselves "within the walls of a noble hall" in order to escape death: "We sat at night, a company of seven. And to our chamber there was no entrance save by a lofty door of

brass: and the door was fashioned by the artisan Corinnos, and, being of rare workmanship, was fastened from within. Black draperies, likewise, in the gloomy room, shut out from our view the moon, the lurid stars, and the peopleless streets" (205).

Although the enclosure of the room may be able to shut out the sight of the destruction caused by the plague, Oinos and his friends are actually trying to shut out death itself.

Death being the one thing that links all men and women, Oinos is thus guilty of trying to set himself apart from the rest of society. Seclusion does not appear enjoyable to the group, for Oinos describes how "a dead weight hung upon us. It hung upon our limbs--upon the household furniture--upon the goblets from which we drank; and all things were depressed, and borne down thereby" (205). In attempting to shut themselves off from life, of which death is a phase, Oinos and his friends appear to have become lifeless themselves. Their limbs are equated with inanimate objects such as furniture and goblets.

Despite their effort to escape death Oinos reveals that Zoilus, one of their companions, is already dead within the hall. Yet the entire group desperately laughs, sings and drinks in a vain attempt to ignore this fact. They may be together within the hall, but each of the seven appears to be alone with his own thoughts, struggling with his own fear of the death they have been unable to escape. The narrator admits that, "although I, Oinos, felt that the eyes of the departed were upon me, still I forced myself not to perceive the bitterness of their expression, and gazing down steadily into the depths of the ebony mirror, sang with a loud and sonorous voice" (205-6). Thus although apparently in the company of others, Oinos is actually alone with his own image. Still ignoring both the life and death which are present around him he remains confined within himself as if he can create a barrier around himself which will prevent reality from reaching him. Yet by attempting to shut out mortality he is cutting himself off from humanity, from the one thing which all men have in common.

Ultimately Oinos' enterprise is to no avail. A shadow appears among the draperies which line the room and speaks to the men, revealing itself as the figure of death. Perhaps more than the identity of the figure, however, the men are horrified by the sound of its voice, for "the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, and, varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable fell dusky upon our ears in the well-remembered and familiar accents of many thousand departed friends" (206). Their attempt to isolate themselves has failed, for the multitude intrudes upon them. The seven are joined by the rest of the society they attempted to shut out and they are reunited with the rest of mankind through death.

The basic plot of "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) is very similar to "Shadow.--A Parable". The story opens with a description of the plague, the "Red Death", which has overcome the city: "The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men" (384). Already it appears that the community has fallen apart and each man is left to fend for himself. This is similar to Poe's depiction of how society really functions in stories such as "The Man in the Crowd". Rather than helping others, people are self-interested and only concerned with their own survival. Prince Prospero, however, takes this narcissistic tendency a step further. Described as "happy and dauntless" although his dominions are already half depopulated, "he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends...and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys" (384). The tone of the narrator's description in this passage suggests a degree of moral distaste for Prospero's desire to cloister himself. As a ruler, his behavior is seen as inappropriate. At the first signs of trouble in his realm he simply abandons his subjects and makes arrangements for his own safety. Prospero is thus not truly concerned with the welfare of others. His power, which isolates him from

the common man, enables him to further alienate himself. Like Oinos he brings companions along, but even though there are a thousand men with him he still appears to be as alone as Oinos was.

The description of their seclusion is very similar to that found in "Shadow": "A strong and lofty wall girdled [the abbey] in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massey hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress...With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself" (384-5). The courtiers seem to equate the external world with contagion. Although they are in the midst of the plague, their attempt to separate themselves from the corruption which lies without implies that they hope to create a fantasy world isolated from the realities of life. Within their enclosed world, they refuse to think or grieve, cutting themselves off even more from reality. Yet by locking themselves behind a wall, they are "creating thereby the conditions of their own premature burial" (Halliburton 308). As we have already seen in Poe, any attempt to step away from society, to cross boundaries meant to enclose mankind, to create a hermetic environment, is doomed to fail and to destroy the individual.

The Prince provides various diversions to entertain the courtiers and to keep their minds from the events of the outside world. Thus after five or six months of seclusion, he entertains all of his thousand friends with a masked ball. The narrator provides an extensive illustration of the Prince's unusual nature, his love of the *bizarre*, shown through a description of his unconventional seven room suite. In everything he does the Prince refuses to be like other men, and thus seeks the *outré* even in his furnishings. The narrator relates that "the tastes of the duke were peculiar...he disregarded the decora of mere fashion...There are some who would have thought him mad" (386). All of the interesting effects he has created in his suite are eclipsed by the gigantic clock of ebony which stands

in the final apartment. As it strikes each hour, "the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to hearken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation" (386). This clock with its constant heart-like ticking or beating is a constant reminder to the courtiers of all they have tried to escape. A symbol of life, and thus of death, it is an indication that from the time they have enclosed themselves the omnipotence they have supposedly excluded already lay within.

Despite the hourly lulls, the party continues. True to his eclectic taste, the Prince's masquerade is described as unusual and arabesque. The guests in their various costumes are "a multitude of dreams" (386). Once again it is implied that Prospero has tried to avoid reality by creating his own dream world. Halliburton even suggests that since the Prince's imagination and ego control everything within the abbey, the rooms become emblematic of his mind. The courtiers thus exist only within him and have little substance on their own (312). In this case, the Prince truly is alone even when surrounded by a crowd. At the stroke of midnight the guests become aware of a stranger amongst them dressed in the appearance of a victim of the Red Death. Prospero is furious at this offensive intrusion of reality into his fantasy world, and confronts the figure with a dagger. Yet he cries out and falls "prostrate in death" upon the floor (388). Finally the courtiers are left with no choice but to face the failure of their attempted isolation:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripod expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. (388)

In locking the doors between themselves and the rest of the world, Prince Prospero and his companions have actually locked in the seeds of their own destruction. Nobody, at least not in Poe's Gothic tales, is able to survive within an enclosed world shut off from the rest of society. The individual needs to be grounded in reality, no matter how harsh it may be, in order to be a functioning member of society. Although a few characters, such as Dupin and Legrand actually benefit from their eccentric personalities and their misanthropic lifestyles, Poe more commonly suggests that when taken to extremes individualism is a destructive rather than a positive concept.

One way in which individualism becomes extreme is through crime, especially murder. In willingly breaking the rules of society and depriving another person of his or her life, the murderer shows his own will to be of more importance than the rights of another. The criminal places himself apart from others by disregarding the laws of his society and by showing no concern for the individuality of others. Poe explores this concept in two of his stories, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat", both published in 1843.

In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the narrator, who has broken one of society's primary taboos by committing murder, tries desperately to undo this radical step and recreate a routine life, perhaps due to his fear of the radical isolation his acts have caused him. From his first words he attempts to re-establish a link with society by proving that he is sane: "True!--nervous--very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am! but why *will* you say that I am mad?..Hearken! and observe how healthily--how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (445). Although he describes a 'disease' which sharpened his senses and automatically set him apart from others 'a la Usher by allowing him to hear "all things in the heaven and in the earth" (445), this narrator insists that he is not unlike others. By telling his story he hopes to prove his sanity, and thus to gain the sympathy of his fellow

desire to break the boundaries of society. According to Benfey, "the speaker of 'The Tell-Tale Heart',...tells his story to convince his audience that he is not mad, not cut off from other people. The tale-telling heart is finally the narrator's own, for this is a tale about the need to communicate, the fear of being cut off, of becoming incommunicado" (37). Yet this attempt to rejoin society ultimately fails.

From the beginning of his story, the narrator admits that "object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult" (445). Unlike Montresor, this narrator does not even try to claim a motive of revenge or greed. Apparently it is the old man's very kindness to him which drives him to murder, as Rea suggested that a fear of being loved or being involved in a human relationship was the basis for Montresor's murder of Fortunato. The narrator suggests, however, that his incentive was actually the old man's eye: "Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees--very gradually--I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (445). It seems to be a fear of being watched, of perhaps having his individuality undermined by the constant scrutiny of the old man, which finally drives the narrator to kill him. In addition to the old man's eye constantly being upon him, the narrator and the old man seem to be closely linked in other ways. When the old man sits up fearfully in his bed, the narrator admits he has done the same thing himself, "night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall" (446). Again, when the old man groans, the narrator says it is a sound he knows well for he has experienced the same feeling. Much as William Wilson and Roderick Usher felt compelled to destroy their "doubles", this character is driven to destroy any link between himself and the old man so that he will be totally alone and free of any human ties. In many ways this could be seen as the goal of Victor Frankenstein as well. At first elated at his new creation he soon feels the strain of being responsible for another and

elated at his new creation he soon feels the strain of being responsible for another and wishes to return once more to his state of detachment. Thus he tries to escape his "offspring", his double, as do many of Poe's characters.

The narrator describes how carefully he planned his act. He portrays himself as a master of dissimulation, being kinder than ever to the old man. This is similar to Montresor's approach with Fortunato, and it highlights once again the impossibility of ever truly knowing another human being. Everybody is apparently completely alone despite their misguided belief in friendship and communication. The narrator spies on the old man sleeping for a week, growing in confidence each night. Finally on the eighth night he reveals that "never before that night had I *felt* the extent of my own powers--of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph" (446). He has placed himself in a position of power over the old man. No longer controlled by social or religious commandments, he exalts in the great power of his individualism. He will act according to his will despite the effects on others. It is especially significant that the old man can function as a father figure. According to Hoffman, in killing him the narrator is thus reversing their situations and giving himself freedom by stepping beyond the bounds of parental authority as well as social and religious authority (Hoffman 229-30). He certainly delights in outwitting the old man, in committing a secret deed that reveals his superiority and shrewdness.

This egoism about his own capabilities is eventually the narrator's downfall, as was the case with Faust and Vathek among others. Believing himself safe beyond the boundaries of ordinary mortals, and thus beyond punishment, he willingly invites the investigating police into the house to look for the old man and determine the cause of a scream reported by a neighbor:

I brought chairs into the room, and desired them *here* to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim. (448)

It seems as though the narrator actually wants to be discovered. His pride and sense of power suggest that he wants others to be aware of what he sees as his cleverness, for he is more than willing to tell the story of the murder although he presents himself in the role of the hero. At the same time his desperate attempt to confess and exonerate himself, to prove himself merely a sane member of the community, suggests that he does want to be caught so that he can be pulled back to society before he strays too far. Having rendered himself totally isolated by his deeds, he now seems to fear the individuality and freedom he killed to obtain. Imagining he hears the sound of the old man's heart still beating beneath the floor boards, he frantically confesses all to the policeman. In this way he once again has a role to play, a position in society, although it is that of the madman and the criminal. Thus his attempt to step outside of a boundary through crime and to radically assert his own individuality ends in disaster for the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" for, unable to bear the estrangement his acts have caused, he sabotages his own plans.

"The Black Cat" is another example of a character who has willingly broken the codes of his society only to find that transgression brings loneliness. Like the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" this narrator attempts to recount his story in order to make others understand his actions and thus win the sympathy that is necessary to facilitate his return to the community. As in "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator protests the label of madness that has been applied to him. Since he is to die the following day he decides to unburden his soul in an attempt to convince the reader that his story is not unusual and that he is not really a criminal. He calls his tale "the most wild yet most homely narrative" and insists it consists of "a series of mere household events" (476). In this manner the narrator attempts to bring the atrocious events down to the level of the everyday bourgeois

consists of "a series of mere household events" (476). In this manner the narrator attempts to bring the atrocious events down to the level of the everyday bourgeois household. Although he has broken laws and codes of behavior, he continues to insist that he is like everyone else in his fear of facing his own isolation.

From the beginning of the story the narrator portrays himself in a favorable light, noting that temperamentally he is docile and tender-hearted with a great devotion to animals. When he marries, his wife indulges this inclination by buying him many pets including a black cat named Pluto. The narrator informs the reader that the cat "was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets" (477). Many critics, such as Hoffman, have suggested that the cat is merely a displacement of the wife, who is rarely mentioned in the story (237). Although the narrator's relation with the cat is described in detail, his wife remains nameless and his relationship with her is largely ignored. Whether the cat is his wife or just a cat, the fact remains that the narrator soon becomes greatly agitated by what he perceives to be a threat to his independence. Eventually his personality begins to change, although he attributes this to "the Fiend Intemperance": "I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others" (477). He begins to neglect his once beloved pets and becomes violent toward his wife. The narrator has begun the process of distancing himself from others. After having cut out one of Pluto's eyes, he finally decides to hang the cat. He attributes this cruelty to the spirit of Perverseness which overcame him: "One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree--hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence;--hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin--a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it--if such a thing

were possible--even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God" (478-9). This appears similar to what the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and possibly "The Cask of Amontillado" tried to express as a motive for murder. In fear of losing his individuality or identity as a result of close relationships, the narrator tries to radically separate himself from others, including God.

This distaste for social ties continues even after the death of Pluto when the narrator finds another cat to bring home. Instead of enjoying his new companion, he soon begins to hate this cat as much as its predecessor: "I know not how or why it was--its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed" (480). His misanthropic tendencies become more and more pronounced until he admits that "the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates--the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind" (481). Once again he begins to abuse his wife, as if his anger at being loved by the cat extends to his relationship with her. The interchangeability of the two is affirmed when the cat nearly trips him one day on the cellar stairs. As he tries to kill it with an axe, his wife steps in to stop him: "Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain" (481). No longer able to bear having his will interfered with he destroys all those close to him by murdering his wife and enclosing her and the cat in a wall of the basement. At this point, with neither his wife nor the cat to disturb him, he is finally able to sleep soundly again. Since the wife/cat infringe upon both his will and his space, and thus his individuality, they have to be destroyed. The means of their destruction leaves him completely disengaged from the everyday world. According to Badenhausen, the narrator has isolated himself by committing this crime and especially by his calm and inhuman response to his actions. Badenhausen cites an article by Spanos, who suggests that "the irreversible act of murder

disengages the individual from the crowd, from the protective shelter of the "they", and thus condemns him to become a fully conscious individual without recourse to the explanation to others that domesticates anguish and anesthetizes the sting of guilt" (Spanos 12). Thus in committing murder, the narrator is taking decisive action to separate himself from the rest of mankind.

Yet like the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart", he soon comes to fear the isolation he killed to obtain. In his egoism at having committed what he feels is the perfect crime, he welcomes the police who come to search his house for his missing wife. When their search proves futile and they prepare to leave, he admits that "the glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness" (483). Once again the criminal's pride in his abilities, or his fear of becoming forever separated from society, leads him to give himself away. His crime discovered, the narrator attempts to re-establish a link with society through a confession which ultimately fails. In fact, according to Badenhausen, "he refuses even to acknowledge a disengagement from the human race by suggesting that his murderous action differed in no way from the normal, everyday occurrences of the domestic realm" and uses his story to campaign for a position in the everyday crowd (490). Thus as in "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator of "The Black Cat" keeps himself isolated and destroys any threat to his individuality by killing those who love him. Yet upon facing the alienation of the criminal who has severed all social ties, his fear leads him to try to deny the situation and to try to explain it in such a way that he will gain acceptance and be allowed to rejoin the group. Of course this attempt utterly fails, for in Poe the desire to transcend the human condition typically leads to self-destruction. Characters who aspire to test the limits of humanity appear either tragically doomed or downright evil.

CONCLUSION

An overview of Poe's short stories reveals an ambiguity about the benefits of individualism that is typical of the Gothic. In exploring issues of self-reliance and the exertion of the human will, Poe shows the manifold problems implicit in these concepts by creating characters who take their individualism to extremes. Rans notes that although "it is only in isolation that the individual may regain the insight of which a developing society robs him, the price he pays for his withdrawal is insanity in the world's eyes" (72). The alienated heroes soon become as sick and tortured as the world from which they have withdrawn. Poe is indeed ambiguous, for although the isolated man may receive rewards, such as the remarkable insight of Dupin or Legrand, they almost always pay the heavy price of madness or death.

Poe's tales are certainly Gothic in atmosphere, setting and what critics like to refer to as "trappings", the typical devices such as secret passages and supernatural figures. Yet more importantly Poe shares what could be called a Gothic world-view. Although many Gothic writers expressed revolutionary ideas through their fiction, Fiedler notes that the American Gothic was "conservative at its deepest level of implication, whatever the intent of its authors" (161). This applies in many ways to Poe's works, which tend to overturn the radical ideas some Gothic novels tried to suggest. Typically, the revolutionary type of Gothic depicts a threat to the identity of a character. A persecuted hero or heroine undergoes a loss of identity because they are being controlled by a powerful Other. Radcliffe's depiction of the relationship between Emily St. Aubert and Montoni is a classic example of this. Soon the loss of individual control progressively spirals until all things

are chaotic. Yet Poe turns this idea upside down. Rather than exploring the fear of loss of individual control, he depicts the fear *of* individual control. His stories are examples of what happens when all moral and social ties have been severed and one person's will is allowed free reign. Of course in the Gothic, the monster has always been he who is excluded from the community. Frankenstein's monster and Caleb Williams are persecuted because of their status as outsiders. Yet Poe's characters often *choose* this state, with devastating consequences.

Poe created characters with virtually no background. They are reluctant to disclose their ancestry, their birthplace or even their names. Living in a self-enclosed environment which quickly becomes a stifling tomb, they are residents of the sort of fragmented world so popular in the Gothic. Social ties have disintegrated, and individualism has led to isolation. The boundaries people create around themselves cannot be transcended, and ultimately each person is alone even if in the midst of a crowd. Yet rather than depicting victims of a changing society, Poe "returned repeatedly to the theme of the outsider, and...a vision of the torment which threatened to engulf the character who stepped out of society" (Galloway 21). As a result of their often willing retreat from the world, his characters find only madness and despair. Madness has always been a prominent motif in the Gothic, perhaps because "madness is the supreme testimony that the individual pays an intolerable price for his initiation into culture" (Morse 21). Yet in Poe, madness and death are the results of a *refusal* to be initiated into culture.

Rather than showing the results of imposed confinement or imprisonment Poe depicts characters who imprison themselves by retreating from society. Thus Poe uses many common images and ideas drawn from the Gothic and yet creates something new by adding his own fears of the future of individualism. The result is a contradictory group of tales in which the outsider is sometimes rewarded but more often destroyed. Finally Poe's

readers must decide for themselves whether Poe is celebrating the Romantic notion of an autonomous self or indicating how problematic the idea of individualism is.

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