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MACABRE AND GRAVE-NOURISHED FANTASY IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S HAUNTED HOUSES

Abstract

Poe's "grave-nourished fantasy" is incorporated with "the energy of hope" for an encounter with the dead in an imaginary space. In his myth-infused Gothic house, the protagonist might conform to death (e.g., "The Assignation"), or idealize destruction or death (e.g., "The Fall of the House of Usher"). Conversely, he might challenge death (e.g., "Ligeia"), or mime a game of chase in which the dead pursues the protagonist for an afterlife reunion (e.g., "The Masque of the Red Death"). No matter which, his imagination in Gothic houses is aroused by affection for the beloved dead. Poe's haunted houses, thus, cannot be reduced to a horrible space, but rather are crossing boundaries connected to a space—a melange of the domestic realm, the spiritual realm, and grave-nourished fantasy. In Poe's macabre haunted house, we perceive a tension: desire for resurrection or death-deferment and man's incapability of conquering Death; this tension is evoked due to fear of the loss of the domestic realm. We also perceive how Poe questions supernatural forces/Black magic (mankind's domination of others through incantation) as well as how Poe identifies "intellect and/or imagination" as an ability to detect divine force for cosmic reunion with Divinity. In the essay, I will examine the two opposite forces—the force of Death and man's will for resurrection or survival—in Poe's house, so as to trace the emotional bond between the protagonist/author and the Gothic space.

Keywords: macabre house, Gothic space, grave-nourished, emotional bond, domestic realm

Introduction

Prior studies have identified grotesque and macabre Gothic elements in Edgar Allan Poe's stories. Those studies include the research of Poe's Gothic house, which is renowned for its strong characteristics—being gloomy, dark, and macabre—as well as the analysis of the link between mental instability and the decay of those houses.

In this study, Poe's Gothic house serves as topophilia[1] of the domestic realm—a realm incorporated with grave-nourished fantasy about crossing the boundaries of life and death, and about retrieving life or perpetuating life in art.[2] "Macabre" is not merely identified with images of dilapidation of the house or mental illness (as prior studies have stressed), but it also relates a desire for love or an emotional/family bond in the spiritual realm. The word "macabre" gained in significance from *la danse macabre* in French, a genre of allegory during the Late Middle Ages. Along with the Hundred Years' War and the rampage of the Black Plague in France, people desired salvation; thus, the religious desire for penance became a comfort. The themes of the inevitability/universality of death and the preparation for death (e.g., penitential lessons) had been incorporated into the medieval art, literature, and religion. Poe's macabre house, however, though revealing the universality of death, does not contain any hint of religious redemption or penitence.

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[1] See Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*.

[2] Not all of Poe's tales and poems are relevant to recalling the beloved. "The Cask of Amontillado" is an example of expressing hatred to his adoptive father. This essay focuses on Poe's love and affection for his beloved families—mother or mother-image people and Virginia.

Instead, it is structured or decorated as a space where two opposite forces do battle; there is a tension between mankind's will for resurrection or reviving his beloved ones in a spiritual realm, and *la danse macabre* that consolidates the existence of an unknown force to which all men submit.

To associate an emotional bond with the macabre and grave-nourished fantasy in Poe's haunted houses, it is necessary to apply John H. Ingram's *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life, Letters, and Opinions* and St. Barton Levi Armand's "Usher Unveiled: Poe and the Metaphysic of Gnosticism." Ingram's biographical documents of Poe help us decode Poe's motivation in his presentation of macabre houses. Since Poe's writing is strongly affected by the emotional bond to his family members, his domestic realm is transformed into an imaginary realm nourished with graveyard fantasies and connected with the world of the dead. St. Armand's Gnostic reading of Poe reveals the process of cosmic reunion with the Creator God—from the dilapidation of the house (body/material) to spiritual resurrection (heaven/spirit)—which is also inspired by Poe's graveyard fantasies for the beloved dead.

The decoration of artworks in "The Assignation"

"Assignation" (originally "The Visionary") is set in Venice, a city of vehement affection as perpetuated by the love story in Byron's "To One in Paradise," a mother's worry for her child's fall into the flood in the twenty-third chapter of Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), and the story of passion and liaison in E. T. A. Hoffman's "Doge and Dogaressa"—each contributing to the model for "The Assignation" (Mabbott, 1978: 148-149). The story was published in the year Poe's adoptive mother died. It is possible that Poe integrated his affection for his mother into his fictional city, which he linked to an affective bond in a world controlled by death.

The vicissitude of the Gothic buildings along the canal of Venice submits to the force of evil in Nature. The Doge's Palace as well as other buildings that the narrator perceives while drifting slowly on a gondola has experienced construction, destruction, and reconstruction throughout history. The construction and reconstruction of each magnificent building parallels man's desire for a construction of order and reason in civilization, yet despite the existence of positive elements, it cannot escape from its destiny of being destroyed. The Doge's Palace, due to its numerous re-constructions, is now a mixture of Gothic style, Byzantine/Istrian structure, the Renaissance, and the neo-classical style. Each period of re-building reveals man's desire for order or a heavenly terrace, yet each survival submits to decline or destruction. Reconstruction mitigates the ruins; the remains divulge the tortures that the building has experienced. The Doge's Palace contains the paintings of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints, which reminds us of the existence of justice and beauty as forces opposing that of evil, yet the signs of decay due to a series of fires that have ripped through the palace nevertheless thrill us. The dragons and gargoyles as decorations of the sculptures symbolize power against the force of evil, yet they also remind us that man fails to escape destruction. The Doge's Palace, when compared to Poe's "haunted palace" in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or the remains of any ancient stone monuments (e.g., the Druid's Stonehenge), manifests the triumph of death.

All beings are consumed/conquered by death. The rise and fall of the Doge's Palace exemplify this. The Bridge of Sighs to which the palace was linked was a bridge that the condemned viewed out of the window of the prison; the last scene of the beauty of Venice before their execution. At that moment they might have imagined an ideal world, or as the narrator has done while drifting slowly on the canal, they have turned "all at once that deep gloom into a livid and preternatural day" (Poe, 1992: 69).

In the opening scene of "The Assignation", Poe produces the effect of mosaic or "a cut and paste"[3] that combines the diverse models of architecture—the classic Greek, the Gothic, and the neo-classic style—and he does so to reimagine the age of beauty, reason, and order that the Doge's Palace has experienced. Gothic architecture is usually an ideal material for the imagination since it has been associated with "an uncanny space" linking to the past. John Matteson has noted the element, "He [Ruskin] required above all that the process of building should…enlist emotion, the imagination, and the intellect of the laborer" (Matteson, 2002: 295). Poe uses the effect of mosaic (mélange); he is a mason rebuilding a form of architecture, infusing the old spirit of the heavenly terrace into a gloomy, decayed space.

[3] See Ana Gonzalez-Rivas Fernandez's "The Assignation: An Aesthetic Encounter of Classical and Gothic."

The decorations—paintings or sculptures—in the hero's palazzo represent what is considered as an ideal structure based on the ancient Egyptian and Classical Greek models, as well as Christian virtues. They serve as a psychological space of the hero, who designs an aesthetic space where he replicates the destiny of the architecture—reviving the glory past and then submitting to the force of evil (the palazzo remains intact by the end of the story; it is the hero and the Marchesa who end in death). The decorations in the palazzo, compared to immortality of glory and beauty, include the *socle* at Sparta, the paintings of Guido's *Madonna della Pietà*, the sculpture of Antinous, the sculpture of the Sphinxes of Egypt, and the portrait of the Marchesa. They are symbolic of love, beauty, and glory; unattainable on Earth, but existing in dreams or imagination. The hero intends to revive them, transforming the uncanny Gothic space into immortality. The socle or plinth refers to a base used to protect a pedestal or sculpture, or sometimes it can carry some inscriptions. In the tale, the hero shows the narrator the socle "upon which are still legible the letters ΛΑΣΜ. They are undoubtedly part of ΓΕΛΑΣΜΑ. Now, at Sparta were a thousand temples and shrines to a thousand different divinities" (Poe, 1992: 73). Whether the letters contribute to the effect of hoax[4] or not, they serve to communicate a mysterious aura. Guido's *Madonna della Pietà* is affiliated with sacrifice and virtue—a force against evil. The hero might imply that he suffers certain tortures, and that the virtue of Saint Mary supports him to delay death, though the deferment of death in fact renders him greater suffering. Antinous fell into the Nile and died around the time of the festival of Osiris; Antinous's death is symbolic of sacrifice, resurrection, and immortality.[5] The sculpture of Antinous in the palazzo suggests passion and a transgression of love, as well as resurrection of spirit through sacrifice. The Sphinxes of Egypt are an emblem of Egypt—figures guarding the tomb of pharaohs. The portrait of the Marchesa suggests the hero's passion for past love. The palazzo, as a mosaic of classical and contemporary artworks, is a mediating realm of the past and the present that evokes violent emotions and passion. It is a fantastic space where the hero replicates beauty, love, and glory through collections of artworks. As Benjamin F. Fisher in "Poe and the Gothic Tradition" notes, the incongruity of imagination and reality causes "he and his beloved [to] look to another world, on the far side of the grave, to consummate their genuine, spiritual love" (Fisher, 2008: 83). If the interior decorations (paintings and sculptures) evoke a world beyond reality (suffering, evil, and death), the hero aims to reach the world through the form of sacrifice and resurrection—a process as exemplified in the myth of Antinous and the redemption of Saint Mary, in which spiritual metamorphosis depends on "the integration of evil."[6] The palazzo suggests human life and destiny, one which Poe stresses in his haunted macabre houses. As his hero deliberately applies the theme of sacrifice to the interior decorations as if he is engaged in the rite of sacrifice for "spiritual love," the palazzo is structured as a space of suicide, submitting to (self-)destruction. In other words, the hero submits to the aim of Nature, moving in a vicious circle of destruction. No longer is he satisfied with staying in the world of art that he fabricates in the Gothic space; he desires death. He designs the palazzo in a way where the force of evil (atmosphere of death) grows within the artworks and then urges him to kill himself. Along with the reality deepening his frustrations, the thought of suicide aggravates him. When he mitigates the frustrations in reality by crossing the boundaries into the realm of art, he moves in a vicious circle; Nature then achieves its aim of destruction.

The Egyptian Sarcophagus and Druidic Ceiling in "Ligeia"

Poe's affection and imagination are attached to places like tombs, graves, and cemeteries; this is apparent in "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Much of the affection the protagonists express in the two stories reflects Poe's reminiscence of the dead. One of these was Mrs. Helen Stannard, whom Poe regarded as a confidant and guide during his turbulent youth. When she died,

[4] See Benton's "Is Poe's "The Assignation" a Hoax?"

[5] At the beginning of the tale, the hero dives into the river to retrieve the child of the Marchesa. The scene, likened to the myth that involves the death of Antinous, divulges a sacrifice ritual for love. For the history of Antinous and the Emperor Hadrian, see Lambert's *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous*.

[6] For more examples about the theme of destiny, sacrifice and spiritual rebirth, see Heinrich Zimmer's *The King and the Corpse*. In "A Pagan Hero and Christian Saint," Conn-eda and Saint John Chrysostom teach "the legend of our redemption through the integration of evil" (Zimmer, 1948: 52).

"for months…Poe—like his great Hungarian contemporary Petöfi, at the grave of his girl-love Etelka—would go nightly to visit the tomb of his revered friend" (Ingram, 1886: 27). Grief for the loss of the beloved is transformed into "the energy of hope" incorporated with "grave-nourished fantasy" in Poe's haunted space (Ingram, 1886: 126).

While the hero in "The Assignation" conforms to the force of destruction, the narrator in "Ligeia" intends to conquer death in a gloomy Gothic abbey decorated in a manner associated with the rite of resurrection in ancient Egyptian and Druidical cultures, though he ends in failure. The abbey—a mélange of Gothic, Druidical, and Egyptian styles—is designed as a temple for the rite of sacrifice and resurrection. The pentagon-shaped chamber (the bridal chamber) in the abbey, decorated with an Egyptian sarcophagus and the Druidic vaulted ceiling, contributes to the pre-Christian (pagan) occult rites of resurrection. Critics have noted the association of the pentagon shape and the realm of imagination. Wilbur, in "The House of Poe," argues that "Poe quite explicitly identifies regular angular forms with everyday reason, and the circle, oval, or fluid arabesque with the otherworldly imagination" (Wilbur, 1969: 269). Randall A. Clack, in "'Strange Alchemy of Brain': Poe and Alchemy," points out that "The pentagon shape of the room reflects the pentacle of hermetic magic (and alchemy)" (Clack, 1996: 383). The narrator counts on the geometric/angular shape transforming the abbey into a space he desires—resurrecting the lost Ligeia. The object of the sacrifice is Rowena, the narrator's second wife and an archetypal "persecuted beauty", as typified in 19th century Gothic tales.[7] Rowena's illness is a mystery. After she dies, the narrator installs the body in a dark chamber, where he distraughtly expects the return of the spirit of Ligeia, not that of Rowena, to the body of Rowena. It is obvious that the narrator resorts to dark magic—necromancy—as a wizard, and the scene of resurrection is compared to the rite of sacrifice in the pyramids of ancient Egypt and the temples of the Druids. The sacrifice of Rowena is associated with the sacrifice of the animals during the annual festival of resurrection in Egypt.[8] A similar rite of sacrifice in history might be found in the death of Lindow Man, who was sacrificed for invoking the favor of the Celtic gods.[9] Rowena's sacrifice involves the return of the highest spirit, and the highest spirit in "Ligeia" is Ligeia, whom the narrator desires to summon through the supernatural power and the decoration of the ancient temple in "the divine realm."[10] Nevertheless, Ligeia is not revived. The man-made decoration that replicates the ornaments of the ancient temples for resurrection signals a tragedy.

The Gothic space in the abbey is controlled by an unknown force that the narrator cannot understand, and his supernatural power that might summon the spirit of Ligeia is powerless. The interior space of the room, though decorated in the manner of resurrection, is still a territory of death, dominated by the god of the Abyss, rather than the wizard-narrator. It is typical of Poe's Gothic space—grotesque and dark—that it disturbs emotions and is uncontrollable by the narrator. It is womb-like (with images of life and tombs), symbolic of the territory of the nature that man cannot manipulate. "Ligeia" speaks to fear and anxiety about death. The narrator falls prey to melancholy and perversity; he is appalled by the process as Ligeia is fighting against death. Eventually, neither the narrator nor Ligeia can conquer death. Macabre still dances in the Gothic abbey, though the narrator has resorted to memories of ancient resurrection rituals or "death-denying" cultures. The unknown force—force of destruction—in the Gothic space is opposed to the narrator's supernatural black

[7] Praz argues that the theme of the persecuted beauty owes much to the work of the Marquis de Sade. See "The Shadow of the Divine Marquis" in *The Romantic Agony*.

[8] The slain animals are symbolic of the murdered god/pharaoh Osiris. The rite of sacrifice is for the return of the god/pharaoh—for the growth of grains and the resurrection of life. *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, p.84, p.179.

[9] Some historians and researchers have questioned the existence of human sacrifice in the Celtic culture. For example, Nora Chadwick supported the idea that such a human sacrifice among the Druids was a rumor or accusation fabricated by Imperialist Rome. See Chadwick's *The Druids.*

[10] The narrator values Ligeia as a spirit in a spiritual realm. The narrator says, "I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine" (Poe, 1992: 350). "The teeth" of Ligeia "glancing back, with a brilliancy almost startling," are compared to "the fullness and the spirituality" of the Greek, as are "the large eyes of Ligeia" (Poe, 1992: 351-352). The narrator regards Ligeia as his guide. While ill, Ligeia fights against death; she says, "Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" (Poe, 1992: 353).

magic. It is compared to the poem "The Conqueror Worm"[11] (written by Ligeia and recited by the narrator in "Ligeia"), which affirms man's incapability of conquering death—a significant theme that Poe incorporates into his Gothic architecture.

The decline of the house in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

"The Fall of the House of Usher," another of Poe's great works and illustrative of his "grave-nourished fantasy" with "the energy of hope," is integrated with the Gnostic philosophy that emphasizes the transmutation of the soul from a confined painful circumstance to a spiritual realm. It is full of preternatural imagination, and full of Poe's longing for the cosmic force idolized by *Eureka*, in which the poet imagines it possible to realize divinity (reunion with the Creator God) through the process of sufferings and death on Earth. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," we do not see a human will fighting against death as we have seen in "Ligeia," nor do we perceive revivification of the past (beauty and order) of the house in "The Assignation." What we see in the myth-writhed Gothic house is a mind conforming to the tempo of Death, as well as a mind imagining the ultimate destruction as the work of God. All events, including the decline and collapse of the Usher clan and the illness of Madeline, are combined with the hero's fantasy and idealization of destruction. A confined gloomy ancient house is transformed to a place of love or affection for the beloved.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" involves a force of evil that brings decay, dissipation, petrification, and destruction to all objects in nature. The story begins with the description of the decadence of the house through the viewpoint of the narrator and the omnipresence of the force of destruction in nature. The force is personalized as "the vacant eye-like windows" (Poe, 1992: 365) watching the surroundings, embraced in decay. All objects—"the bleak walls" (Poe, 1992: 365), "the silent tarn" (Poe, 1992: 367), "the decayed trees" (Poe, 1992: 367), etc.—expose that a family has run its course. The family in decline is the House of Usher. The interior decoration of the house, distinguishable from the magnificence of the palazzo in "The Assignation," is embedded with decadence. That the furniture is featured with darkness suggests ill omen: "the ebon blackness of the floors" (Poe, 1992: 368), "the somber tapestries of the walls" (Poe, 1992: 368), "the gloomy furniture" (Poe, 1992: 377), etc. A fissure that draws from the top to the bottom on the exterior wall of the architecture illuminates the house's fall into ruin. The destiny of the House of Usher parallels that of the haunted palace in the poem "The Haunted Palace"[12], composed and sung by Roderick Usher as he is becoming skinnier and losing all reason. The story in the poem is about a king's once prosperous palace, which falls into ruin due to a certain conspiracy schemed by evil people. The palace, in its golden age, is a "radiant palace" decorated with rubies and pearls. Banners, the sound of a lute, streams of musicians, and dancing all symbolize prosperity. When evil penetrates, the palace falls into ruin, turning into a haunted house, and those who enter the house are driven mad. The decline of the palace is not merely that of physics, but the loss of reason. The poem is compared to the conditions of the House of Usher. While Roderick sings a poem in which a palace declines in a corrupted world, Poe presents a house in decay and decadence in the tale. Corresponding to an unknown disease in the poem, a mysterious sickness—perhaps catalepsy—that Madeline, Roderick's twin sister, suffers from divulges a world occupied by death. The incidence of entombing Madeline alive is incorporated into the themes of conquering death and "the Conqueror Worm" as we have seen in "Ligeia." Though she struggles out of death, Madeline still ends in submitting to death. She falls "inward upon the person of her brother" in "her violent and now final death-agonies" (Poe, 1992: 382), while the fissure rapidly widens and the house collapses (Poe, 1992: 382).

"The Fall of the House of Usher" involves not merely a destructive nature, but it reflects a psychological journey of the hero/Poe, engaged in a cosmic force of destruction and reunion with God, a significant idea developed in Poe's *Eureka*. The tale is full of supernatural/preternatural imagination; nature is dressed with God's will and divinity. Kim Drain, in "Poe's Death-Watches and the Architecture of Doubt," perceives that Poe exalts death and destruction to divinity: "death" in

[11] The phrase "the conqueror worm" appears in Spencer Wallis Cone's "The Proud Ladye," a poem which Poe reviewed for *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in June 1840. See Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, p. 391. See also Mabbott's notes in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Poems*, p.323.

[12] First published in in the April 1839 edition of the *American Museum* magazine.

Poe's story "is only a translation from one expression of God's will to another," and "the collapse of the universe is only the beginning of the next universe" (Drain, 2006: 175-176) Barton Levi St. Armand, in "Usher Unveiled: Poe and the Metaphysic of Gnosticism," argues that the tale is concerned with a metaphysic of Gnosticism, which "is basically one of a radical dualism and sees the soul trapped in the materiality of a prison-house world, with escape possible only through a supreme act of knowing, or gnosis" (St. Armand, 1972: 1). The structure of the tale based on divinity is, as Scott Peeples observes, controlled by the author: It echoes "a kind of dream or psychological journey" (Peeples). The phenomenon of decay and decadence is not simply that of nature, but the will of the author, who stimulates the vitality and movements of all objects into destruction (Abel). The house is a metaphor of "the head" (the mind) of Roderick Usher (Abel, 1949: 183); the interior is Roderick Usher's "visionary mind" (Wilbur, 1969: 264), by which "the poetic soul" "[shakes] off this temporal, rational, physical world and escape, if only for a moment, to a realm of unfettered vision" (Wilbur, 1969: 267). That Poe's/the hero's desire for the spiritual realm, continuing his life somewhere, corresponds to his "grave-nourished fantasy," including the vampire fantasy about a "Dark Lady" (e.g., Madeline and Ligeia) rising from death and the collapse of the house and destruction of all in preparation for the next cosmic life. The scene of horror—whether the Gothic house in a fictitious world or the graveyard in reality—is infused with energy of hope; hope with the continuity of life together with the beloved dead.

Through the lens of the narrator's narrative, all the objects in decay that have revealed their imminent destructions are laden with mystery or supernatural forces. For example, the fissure on the exterior wall that reveals the decay of the house is rendered with a divine quality, since there is a light of divinity shedding through it. The light is a mélange of evil and divinity (Stromberg, 1968: 152), and the destruction is part of the design of God. Another example details the composition and features of Roderick. The narrator describes him as a demi-God, characteristic of being ethereal and distinguishable, though we know that Roderick has taken ill and is in mental decline. His twin sister is endowed with supernatural will/force from her mysterious illness, striving out of the coffin, to her "second death." To calm and amuse Roderick, the narrator reads "The Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning (an inventive story by Poe), in which the scene of killing a dragon accentuates supernatural force, while Madeline is undergoing "the resurrection." In the last moment before "the second death" of Madeline, what Roderick sees is "the lofty and enshrouded figure," rather than a bloody corpse. The moment of the collapse of the house into the tarn is described as a "sullenly and silently" divine movement towards a spiritual realm.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" parallels another short story of Poe's, "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion"[13] ("The Comet") which describes the Earth's destruction by a comet and assumes a continuity of life beyond the grave. However, unlike "The Conversation", "The Fall" has no description of a reunion with the Gnostic God or any angelic visions after the collapse of the house. Poe emphasizes more horror and suffering on Earth than he does "a blessed Elysium" in an ethereal realm. His narrator, though sentient to preternatural/supernatural force in the Usher home, underscores that the house is immersed in natural decomposition: "an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn" (Poe, 1992: 367). Poe is concerned with physically/mentally declined conditions as well as the threats of death as typified by "Ligiea", but not because he does not believe in the existence of Elysium. Instead, he believes that cosmic reunion with God exists, and that existence depends on "intellect and/or imagination."[14]

[13] The apocalyptic science fiction story was published in in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in 1839.

[14] Reason or intellect is expressed by "regular angular forms" (Wilbur, 1969: 269) or geometric structures. "The circle, oval or fluid" is connected with the imagination (Wilbur, 1969: 269). For example, in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), the geometric shapes of X, V, X, and ◇ shown in the albatross-penguin nest and the voyage route to the South Pole are linked to a gnostic epistemological quest for a spiritual realm. Poe also expresses the relationship of intellect, angular shapes, and imagination in his detective stories.

The seven rooms in "The Masque of the Red Death"

Lack or loss of imagination threatens Poe's structure of the "grave-nourished fantasy." Poe started to confront such a threat in the middle of January 1842, when his wife and cousin Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe first exhibited signs of tuberculosis—a tenacious illness that killed both the poet's mother and elder brother—and indeed she never recovered from the illness from which she suffered until death. Poe's domestic ties to Mrs. Clemm and Virginia are haunted by a depth of despair. Mr. Graham says,

> I shall never forget how solicitous of the happiness of his wife and mother-in law…His love for his wife was a sort of rapturous worship of the spirit of beauty, which he felt was fading before his eyes. I have seen him hovering around her… (qtd. in Ingram, 1886: 176)

Virginia's illness influenced Poe a lot. The reverie about an afterlife reunion with divinity was challenged by reality, and Poe's world of beauty was replaced by the shadow of plague. The poet was profoundly despondent. On the one hand, Poe needed more creative stories, more writing that could support his "grave-nourished fantasy," to rescue his dreams about an afterlife Elysium. On the other hand, his assuredness regarding immortality dwindled. Poe was sentient to the existence of death. His Red Death in "The Masque of the Red Death" alludes to Virginia's fatal illness.[15]

> No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. (Poe, 1992: 604)

What's more, the tale predicts the death of Virginia as well as that of Poe. Poe incorporates a very complicated mood into the tale. It can be seen as an extension of the poet's imagination of the afterlife Elysium incorporated with themes of eschatology, a macabre Gothic space, and a graveyard fantasy, as we have seen in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligiea." The story reveals not only anxiety of death, but also demonstrates recognition of the vain efforts in the realm of Death. Poe projects almost all of the occurrences of his life—a circumstance of poverty and death of the beloved—into the tale, divulging that the universe is controlled by an unknown force that counters man's efforts and successes.

The chase of Prince Prospero after the Red Death in the abbey can be compared to the synopsis in the poem "The Conqueror Worm," first published separately in *Graham's Magazine* in 1843 and added to the revised version of "Ligeia" in 1845. In the poem, we also perceive "a blood-red thing that writhes from out the scenic solitude." While Prince Prospero chases the Red Death, "mimes" in the poem run around a "Phantom" in circles; whereas the revelers in the abbey fall down before the Red Death. A monstrous shape eats the mimes, and what follows the scene is "a funeral pall." Both literary works echo the theme of the inevitability and universality of death in the medieval *la danse macabre*. In "The Masque of the Red Death," Prospero's wealth and chase after the Red Death imply Poe's desperate pursuit of a better life that can improve the conditions of his family. The poet had devoted his life to writing and acquiring fame in literary circles, yet he was unable to secure a steady income by writing. He once tried to secure a government position, but he failed. His life was like being chased by the mysterious Red Death. When he was about to become a success—organizing his magazine—he was struck by a mysterious death, at the age of 40, just two years after Virginia passed away. The story signals an end to Prospero's/the poet's life, as if Poe deliberately employs humor as a constitutive element of eschatology.

Nevertheless, Poe desires to vault the tragedy of human life to divinity so as to assuage depression and give his life hope. Bloom in *The Tales of Poe: Modern Critical Interpretations* notes,

> The characters of Poe's tales live out nearly every conceivable fantasy of introjection and identification, seeking to assuage their melancholia by psychically devouring the lost objects of their affections (Bloom, 1987: 7).

[15] See Silverman's *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*, p. 180-181.

Poe sees the Red Death as the agent of death that brings eternal rest—that ends his anxiety and melancholy—and he identifies the rhythm of death proceeding in the house as the revelation of the will of God. Haspel, in "Bells of Freedom and Foreboding," notes that the Red Death "is not a random source of evil in a chaotic universe, spreading death without rhyme or reason, but rather is an expression of the will of God" (Haspel, 2012: 62). The interior space of the abbey is deliberately structured as a murdering space penetrable by the God of Death, even though it is ironically secure and protected from the plague. The theme of destruction is linked to the theme of eschatology, though there is no Christian redemption or salvation, and it is associated with Poe's imagination of immortality in *Eureka*. For example, the shape of a clock shown in the seven rooms and a real clock standing opposite the seventh room signal two types of time: the one that ranges from six to midnight is the mundane time (controlled by death), and the other is symbolic of the time from midnight to somewhere that does not exist in real life (immortality). Time accelerates towards death, and then towards immortality. As Eddings notes in "Poe's Tell-Tale Clocks," time progresses in rhythmical speed,

> The clock brackets the story, appearing early and at the end, and the effect of its chiming on the assembly is evoked five times. The clock is thus given palpable form seven times within the tale, subtly tying it in with the seven rooms that also symbolize the idea of time as progression as they move from blue (birth) westward to black (death). (Eddings, 2010: 12)

When the clock chimes at midnight, the mundane time ends; death triumphs all, bringing destruction to all revelers and Prince Prospero (Zimmerman "Allegoria and Clock Architecture"). The end of the mundane time parallel lies in the last of the seven rooms—the black room—beyond which is the "entrance into the ethereal repertoire of extra-carnal spirits" (Zimmerman "The Puzzle of the Color Symbolism in 'The Masque of the Red Death': Solved at Last?" 2009: 69). Moreover, Poe's light and the color of the seven rooms incorporate the imagination of immortality. The light reminds us of the stained glass windows of a Gothic Cathedral that sheds into the interior the light of God. The seven rooms signal the progress from birth to death, and then to somewhere in the spiritual realm. The progress towards youth, prosperity, and death parallels the movement towards death and immortality.

Conclusions

The two opposite forces—the force of death and the will of resurrection or survival—occupy Poe's Gothic imaginary space. Fear and anxiety for the loss of the beloved families prompts the poet to create a space of reverie that transcends time and space. Poe creates a "perverse house"—a house structured as a suicidal house, a murdering house, a magic ritual temple, or a roistering place—that attracts death, all as he aims to transcend death. His fearful houses, called up by love and affection for the dead, are the realm of topophilia adorned with dreams about an afterlife Elysium. Each house reflects the affective bond between the poet and the graveyard world. Even though each haunted house ends in an eclipse, or being embraced by an unknown force that man cannot understand and he has to stop short of explanation, Poe still risks transgressing that unknown boundary. The poet's macabre grave-nourished fantasy serves to transform the dead that he loves to the immortal souls, and his gothic houses, a spot of immortality.

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