Premature Burial in the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe

THE MOTIF OF PREMATURE BURIAL IN THE TALES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE.

by

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ABSTRACT

The motif of premature burial occurs frequently in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. A precedence to its appearance is documented in ancient folklore, classical literature, and especially in the literature of Poe's own era. In this context, psycho-analytic evaluations tend to illustrate more about the psycho-analytic heritage than they do about Poe.

In the creation of his short stories, Poe utilized a painstaking craft to create a desired effect. He used the motif of premature burial in this light, to posit a truth of Essence from a carefully crafted truth of Existence.

When one examines Poe's work from the perspective of the background of the motif, novel interpretations arise to highlight tales which in the past have been tediously interpreted. The new perspectives are not contrived, but derive from a solid tradition behind premature burial. The motif finally represents the encircled nature of Poe's thought as a whole. Trapped with a perpetual consciousness of the limited aspect of the universe which contains the element of

perversity and will eventually return to unity, man must strive to know the limitations of his sphere.

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RESUME

Le thème de sépulture prématurée se présente souvent dans les contes d'Edgar Allan Poe. Cette idée avait été puisée dans la légende, les classiques, et surtout dans la littérature à l'époque même de Poe. Dans ce contexte, la psychanalyse a tendance à exposer davantage l'héritage psychanalitique que le caractère même de Poe.

Poe apporta dans la conception de ses contes, un soin méticuleux à créer l'effet désiré. Dans cet ordre d'idée, il employa l'idée de sépulture prématurée pour traduire sa philosophie de "l'essence" face à "l'existence".

Si l'on examine le travail de Poe au point de vue fondamental du thème, il en ressort une interprétation inusitée mettant en valeur des histoires qui jusque là avaient été interprétées à satiété. La nouvelle perspective ne s'en trouve pas inventée, mais dérivée d'une tradition marquée à la base de la sépulture prématurée. Enfin, le thème représente la nature encerclée de la pensée de Poe comme entité. Sans cesse hanté par la conscience soutenue de l'aspect limité de l'univers avec son élément de perversité et devant retourner à l'unité, l'homme doit viser à connaître les limitations de sa sphère.

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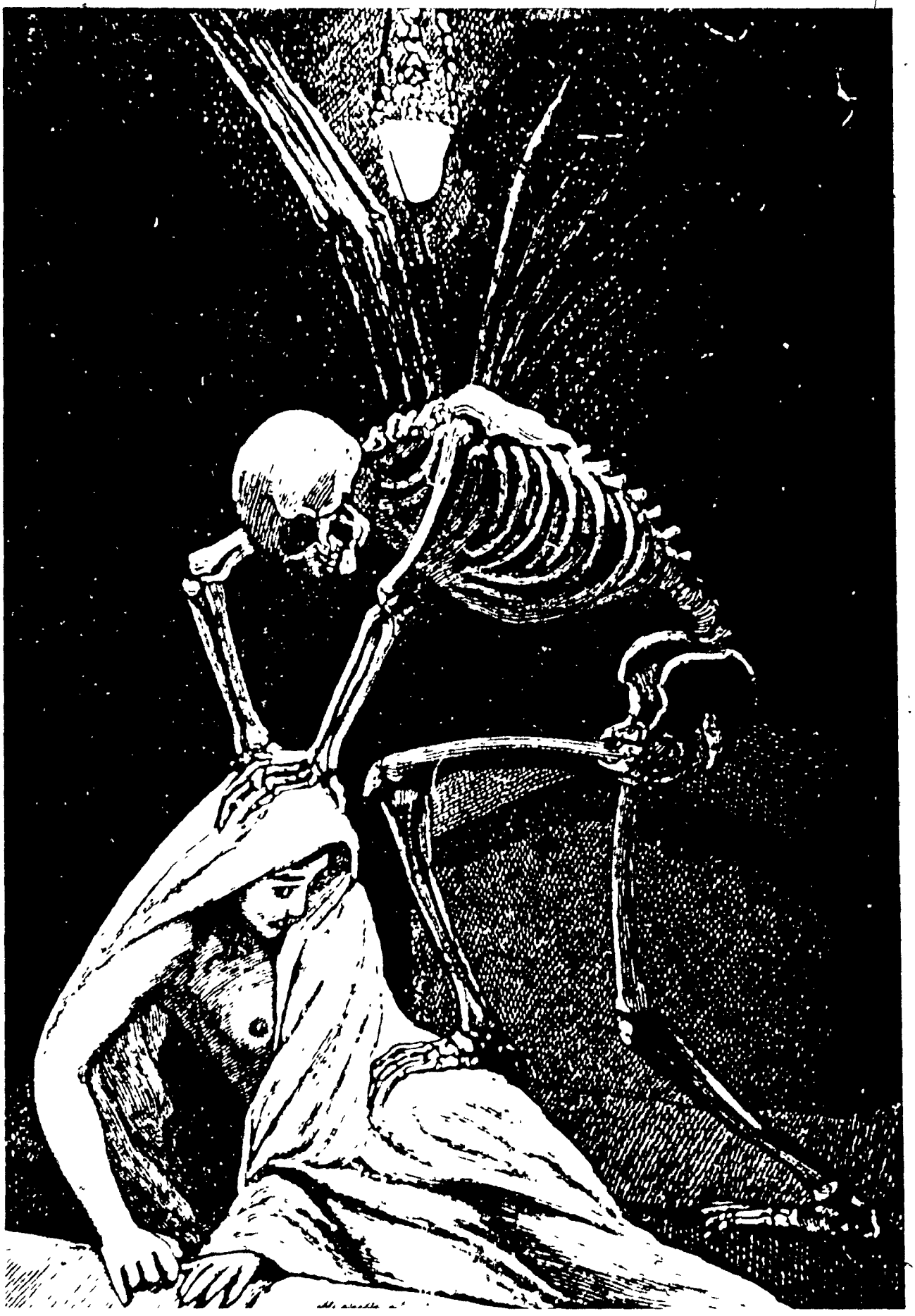
Sketch by Leonard depicting "The Premature Burial"



From Edgar Poe par lui-meme (photograph by R. S. Diamond)

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INTRODUCTION

Among the many volumes written about Edgar Allan Poe and his work, it is difficult to imagine that not one to date has specifically dealt with an important and repetitive motif within his tales -- that of premature burial. The motif is significant not merely by virtue of its frequent repetition, but by the illumination it sheds upon Poe's individual works and his aesthetic in general. It is crucial to realize an evaluation of the motif itself, its traditions and availability to Poe. The variant forms of premature burial must be categorized when applied to Poe's literary produce. The motif is a far-reaching one. It is discovered in various folklore from the Irish to the Hottentot. Allusions to it are found in Herodotus, Livy, Pliny, and Plutarch. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare all utilize premature burial in their plays. The periodical literature of Poe's era makes frequent reference to the motif.

A diverse appearance is complemented by a diffused applicability. There is premature burial out of fear and respect, as a form of punishment, as sacrifice, and by mistake or intention. These classifications are my own, suggested <u>after</u> a close reading of Poe's tales. It is

surprising to see how well the motif as it appears in Poe meshes with the motif as it appears in folklore. Whether incidental or intentional, Poe's use of the motif concurs in many respects with anthropological findings. Further, since the classifications suggested span the general motif and the periodical literature of Poe's era, these will be discussed as background to Poe's use.

With the traditions of the motif in hand, it becomes clear that the psycho-analytic interpretation is irrelevant. The appearance of the motif is no longer rationalized as dealing with Poe's biography alone. The symbols of Poe's unconscious are found about him and before him in the sources to his literature. The psycho-analytic interpretation, if valid, is more applicable to the traditions of the psycho-analytic heritage, than it is to the work of Poe. Premature burial in the final analysis, was not <u>necessarily</u> of Poe's soul; it was rather of Poe's era and reading.

Poe's work is not only applicable to the traditions of the motif, but to itself. In "The Premature Burial," Poe states that it ~~is~~ <u>fact</u> rather than fiction (echoed in <u>Blackwood's</u>) that creates the greatest horror (effect), and it is with this in mind that Poe manipulates the motif to suit his own ends. Whether it is the desperate tone of narration in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the inquisitorial background to "The Pit and The Pendulum," the monomaniacal fixation evidenced by Egaeus toward the teeth in "Berenice,"

the pathologically rational narration of "The Black Cat," or the hideous aspect of "The Red Death," fact is manipulated and premature burial added to achieve a calculated effect.

Looking at the tales from the perspective of premature burial, (peering out into the world of the tale from the vault), novel perceptions and interpretations can often be noted. Examining the tale from the vantage point of the classifications and background information concerning the motif collected here, the focal point of the tales are often altered significantly to give a new approach to tales which have been tediously interpreted. This approach cannot be dismissed as whim; a solid tradition involving the motif of premature burial within and without the work of Poe does exist.

The motif is finally representative of the body of Poe's work as a whole. Indeed, Poe transforms the motif of premature burial in order to highlight his personal view of the universe and of art. To the man or woman buried alive in the tomb, the sepulchre becomes the universe. As is stated in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe desires an "insular" effect because it has the force of a "frame to a picture." The universe is limited; it is derived from one single particle and will again return to unity. The circumscription of the prison represents the delineation of the universe highlighted by its insularity. Man's position in that universe is in turn emphasized. Poe's thought is encircled by

an ever-present terror of consciousness. His struggle to comprehend and define the limits of our sphere is mirrored in the attempt by his protagonists to describe the limits and escape the confines of the crypt -- to surmount man's relegation to the failings of human knowledge.

CHAPTER I

THE MOTIF AND THE GENERAL BACKGROUND

In Chapter I, I wish to classify the motif of premature burial in terms which will later apply to the tales of Poe. Each individual classification will be discussed as a separate entity, although several are closely interrelated with each other. I will take into account Poe's familiarity with the subject material, and where possible, stipulate his knowledge of specific references to the motif. It is unfortunate that Poe kept no diary or journal, and thus his reading must be inferred from his creative writings and the wealth of his critical journalism.

A) Premature Burial Out of Fear

Death was and still is feared with a universal dread and horror. Superstitions abound concerning both the dead and the dying. One of the major reasons behind burial is the fear of the dead.[1] In order to allow the spirit its rest, to

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[1] Poe shows his familiarity with this fear in "The Oblong Box".

> ... the universal prejudice which would prevent his doing so openly was well known. Nine-tenths of the passengers would have abandoned ship rather than take passage with a dead body.

Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems, Random House, Inc. (New York, 1938), p. 719.

keep the deceased from haunting the living, the body is interred. It was originally believed that the recently dead, suddenly without anything to do, envied those living. The most jealous of the dead were those who had died young and childless. These were envious to the point that they would often chase the living at night and inflict many forms of evil.

Dying people have been feared by numerous cultures for it was believed that infection would stem from the dying spirit. In order to escape contamination and hasten a "proper" burial, cultures frequently buried the dying alive. Sidney Hartland cites examples of this practice:

> The Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco, oppressed by the feeling of helplessness and superstition, ... neglect the patient and deny him food; and lest he should die in the village during the night, he is removed to a distance ..., or death is hastened by premature burial. (Grubb, Among the Indians of the Par. Chaco, 1904, pp. 41-45). The tribes of the Navitilevu, Fiji, place the dying man in the grave, with food and water. As long as he can make use of them, the grave remains open; when he ceases to do so, the earth is filled in and the grave closed (JAI x [1881] 144) ...
> The Hottentots used to bury old and superannuated persons alive, ... (Thunberg, Travels, Lond. 1755-1756, ii, 194). So the various Bantu tribes of South Africa either abandoned the dying or buried them before death. (Cambell, Travels, Lond. 1815, pp. 488, 515).[2]

It is conceivable that premature burials were conducted originally out of an economic necessity. The custom is known to have continued, however, even when the economics had altered. In

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[2] James Hastings, The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, T. and T. Clark Co. (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 414.

West Africa it is not uncommon that a protracted illness frightens and wearies the attendants --.

> They decide that the body, though mumbling inarticulate words and aimlessly fingering with its arms, is no longer occupied by its personal soul; that has emerged. 'He is dead', and they proceed to bury him alive. Yet they deny that they have done so. They insist he was not alive only his body was 'moving'.[3]

Among tribes as far distant as Ceylon, Russia, South Africa, and the Philippines, terror of the corpse was so great that the dying person was thrown from his house. If he died within his domain, they would burn it. Fear became so frantic at times, that the rest of the houses in the village would be destroyed to give the corpse a solitary splendour in death. A belief in the uncleanliness of the corpse was also inspired by terror regarding the dead. The haste to inter found among the Jews and also the South American Indians, is even to this date still retained.

In large part, premature burial was inspired, in spite of other professed reasons, by a horror of the corpse and a superstitious fear of contamination. As late as 1902, a description is given in a report of the Palestine Exploration Fund, of a sick woman thrown from a Passover assembly due to a fear of defilement. The fear that had propagated premature burial had not disappeared in 1902, nor has it vanished today.

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[3] Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa (London, 1904), p. 54. This quote reminds us of Poe's "Loss of Breath," when the apothecary would not believe Lackobreath alive even though he "endeavored to confute" the supposition that he was dead by "kicking and plunging with all (his) might." (399)

One can still note irrational superstitions concerning the graveyard; a proliferation of "Zombie" horror stories (the return of the dead), and the custom of immediate burial among various ethnic groups. The strength of the original fears which perpetrated premature burials can be measured by the lingering existence of many of the same fears even in our own era.

B) Respect Or Duty

A custom of burying people alive out of respect or duty occurs frequently in the history of mankind. Wives, servants, and animals were often prematurely interred with their dead masters. Maculloch[4] notes of the Celts that wives of heroes wished to be buried along with their husbands while the same request was witnessed in Africa. The Chinese buried servants and workmen in the tombs of early emperors[5] and this practice was also carried out among the Egyptians. In Latin America, servants threw themselves into the graves of their masters, afraid they would be sent to Hades if they refused. The custom prevailed among almost all of the Aryan

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[4] John Maculloch, Religion of the Ancient Celts, T. and T. Clark Co. (Edinburgh, 1911), p. 238.

[5] This is documented in Brewster's Edinburgh Encyclopedia, 1830 edition. The Encyclopedia was written for William Blackwood. It is conceivable that since Poe was so familiar with Blackwood's Magazine, he might have come across this work and its long section on burial.

peoples; where if not buried alive, the relatives were burned or in some other way sacrificed. In the Arabian Nights (which Poe had read)[6] Sinbad is buried alive with his dead wife, an incident probably founded on some real custom of an Eastern tribe.

Animals were often buried alive as possessions of the deceased. This custom was widespread; practiced in South America, England, Manipur, Prussia, Poland, Russia and Siberia. The burial of such animals was intended for the use of the dead. The beasts were supposed to stop the spirit from wandering and protect the deceased from evil influence; to act as a tutelary spirit.

C) Punishment

Burying a person alive was an ancient form of punishment. Those unfortunate enough to receive such treatment were either walled up or actually buried in the earth. Monks,[7] wives of knights, nuns, and girls of noble blood were prematurely interred in order to avoid the shame of public

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[6] Killis Cambell, "Poe's Reading", University of Texas Studies in English, V (October, 1925), pp. 166-196.

[7] Poe was obviously aware of the practice of monks burying people and themselves being buried alive. From "The Black Cat" --

> "I determined to wall it up in the cellar, as the Monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims." (Poe, p. 228). See footnote 32.

execution. Roman vestal virgins who had been violated were walled in subterranean chambers. Livy in Book XXII of his Second Punic War, gives reference to this practice:

> ... two of the vestals were in that year detected in breach of their vow. Their names were Opimia and Florinia; one, as the custom is, was buried alive ...[8]

Frazer in The Golden Bough cites further evidence of unfaithful virgins being buried alive as punishment, concluding in general "that a custom of burying people alive has been practiced for punishment or sacrifice by Romans, Russians, and Germans, even when the victims were not of royal blood."[9]

In Peru, wives of the sun were prematurely interred if violated while the Chinese have practiced this custom from antiquity up to fairly recent times. (With the Germans, it was common in the 15th century).[10] Robinson states that "burial alive was apparently a form of punishment for malefactors in ancient Ireland";[11] and illustrates with an ancient Irish saga known as the "Death of Grimthan." A widely circulated tale was that of Oran and St. Columba. It centered

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[8] Livy, Second Punic War, trans. Church and Brodribb, Macmillan and Co. (London, 1901), Book XXII, p. 57.

[9] James Frazer, The Golden Bough, Macmillan & Co. (New York, 1935), Vol. II, 228, n. 5.

[10] Funk and Wagnall's Folklore, Funk and Wagnall Co. (New York, 1949), p. 173.

[11] F. N. Robinson, Kittredge Anniversary Papers, Ginn & Co. (Boston, 1973), 195n.

around an argument over the nature of the after-world. Oran decided to settle the disagreement by going for three days into the grave. When the grave was opened at the end of the time limit, Oran stated that heaven and hell are "not such as they are alleged to be."[12] Startled by his latitudinarian sentiments, Columba ordered earth to be put over him and Oran was buried alive.

> Il y à des moments où la litérature et la réalité se rencontrent et se communique mutuellement une nouvelle force, qui rajenuit les anciennes traditions et leur donne une vie nouvelle.[13]

Merimée is applicable here; the motif of premature burial as punishment is given new life and vigor in the creations of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and in classical mythology. In "Prometheus Bound",[14] as a result of giving fire to man, Prometheus is to be buried alive as punishment inflicted by the Gods. Hermes warns of impending fate:

> And now, if you are not persuaded by my words, consider what a storm and hurricane of ill will fall upon you past escape. For, first of all, with thunder lightening flash the father will tear up this rocky

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[12] Maculloch, p. 238.

[13] H. Merimée, from Henri Hauvette, La "Morte Vivante," Boivin and Cie. (Paris, 1933), p. 307.

[14] "Israfel" and "Sonnet-Silence" suggest several of the songs in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" according to Professor Cambell. Poe was probably familiar with "Prometheus Bound", but if he was not, he could have acquainted himself with the work tracing backward from Shelley's poem.

> gully, will hide your body beneath, and arms of stone will fold you round about.[15]

As the play comes to a close, Prometheus has not altered his course, and we are told of the fruition of Hermes' threat --

> ... thunder, lightening and earthquake. Prometheus and the rock to which he is bound gradually sink out of sight.[16]

The "unjust" punishment strikes the audience (and reader) with emotion difficult to ignore.

> Him the god made mad, and the godly power
> Thrust him, living, deep in a rocky dungeon;
> There he learned to know how impious frenzy
> Draws divine vengeance.[17]

Sophocles follows with greater detail the motif of premature burial as punishment in "Antigone."[18] He touches upon the psychological effects in the actual suicide of his heroine, striking nearer to Poe's use of terror and the motif. Creon issues the punishment of burial alive.

> I will take her where the path is the loneliest, and hide her, living, in a rocky vault, with only so much food as the pion's laws require, that the city

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[15] Aeschylus, "Prometheus Bound", Ten Greek Plays, trans. Lind, Houghton Mifflin Co. (Boston, 1957), 1015-1018.

[16] Ibid., 1078-1079.

[17] Sophocles, "Antigone", Ten Greek Plays, trans. Lind, Houghton Mifflin Co. (Boston, 1957), 960-963.

[18] Poe was definitely familiar with "Antigone." He quotes the work in his "Colloquy of Monos and Una" and mentions Sophocles in other areas not less than seven times.

> may avoid reproach. There she can pray to Hades, whose Gods above she worships; perhaps they will bargain with death for her escape.[19]

Antigone has no choice but to go "friendless ... living to the grave."[20] The feelings of the heroine as she approaches her fate are given full vent, and the idea of premature interment as neither life nor death emerges (a concept important to Poe). She speaks:

> ... As I near that rocky chamber, my prison and my tomb -- none weeps for me unhappy, who have no friend in the sun nor in the shadows, no home with the living or the dead.[21]

The injustice of Antigone's punishment is overwhelming, and in the final analysis, it is Creon's imposition of a choice between burial alive and death which leads to suicide.

> And when you have shut her in the vaulted tomb according to my word, leave her, leave her there alone. Let her choose whether she wishes to die, or to live buried in such a home.[22]

Within "Antigone", reference is made by the chorus to classical mythology and the burial alive of Danaë by her father. The chorus says:

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[19] Sophocles, 774-780.

[20] Ibid., 920.

[21] Ibid., 848-850.

[22] Ibid., 886-889.

> Even thus in an older day was Danaë,
> Young and wistful, taken away from the sunlight.
> Noble of race was she in a brass-walled prison
> Hid by her father.[23]

As the tale is told, Danaë was malevolently entombed by her father Acrisius in a bronzed chamber to prevent a son being born to her. Zeus, however, gained entrance to the sepulchre in the form of a shower of gold giving Danaë the germ to produce a son, Perseus. The two were shut up (when Acrisius discovered the birth) in a coffin which was set adrift in the ocean.[24] They escaped as the legend concludes, with Perseus killing his grandfather fulfilling prophecy. Further allusions to premature burial may exist in mythology. It is enough, however, to note the punishment motif available to Poe in the story of Danae and in Aeschylus and Sophocles.

D) Sacrifice

Without doubt the most frequently practiced form of premature burial was that of the foundation sacrifice. At the construction sites of bridges, palaces, city walls, or

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[23] Ibid., 101. In the 1810 edition of the Encyclopedia Brittanica, which Poe is known to have quoted (Cambell, "Poe's Reading"), the story of Danaë is related. Also the 1830 edition of the Encyclopaedia Americana contained the tale. Both Burton Pollin and Arthur Hobson Quinn believe Poe had read this latter work. If Poe had not already been familiar with the legend, it would have been available to him through these sources.

[24] The premature burial of Perseus adrift in the ocean reminds us of Arthur Gordon Pym's first burial alive while adrift in the hold of the Grampus.

embankments, a legend arose that the building would collapse if a human was not buried alive beneath its foundations. The builder's wife was usually the victim, but at times innocent children, virgins, beggars, or students were used.

The custom was recorded in Germany, the east of Europe, India, in the west of Africa, North Africa, the European continent, and in the Celtic parts of the British Isles. Robinson relates[25] that the most familiar Celtic instance is related by Nennius of the sacrifice ordered by British Druids at the construction of Vortigern's castle. Maculloch[26] emphasizes the popular belief that the castle could not be built until a sacrifice was offered -- for the stones were said to disappear as soon as they were laid. Macculloch adds that:

> Many similar legends are connected with buildings all over the Celtic area, and prove the popularity of the Pagan custom.[27]

Burial alive was practiced on the American continent as well. The Shuswap Indians believed that the beaver when he builds his dam buries one of his young inside the foundation to make the structure strong.[28] It is common in tales of the North Western tribes that when an important man built a house, captives and slaves were put beneath the house posts

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[25] F. N. Robinson, p. 195.

[26] Maculloch, p. 238.

[27] Ibid., p. 239.

[28] Hastings, p. 114.

upon which the building was constructed. In Central and South America, similar incidents are related in the Ponol Vuh and in the legends concerning Chibchas' palace.

Various scares, due to the imprint of these legends on the popular mind, have taken place in comparatively "recent" times at the erection of great architechtural sites. In India, at the building of the Hoogly Bridge, the Calcutta Harbour Works, and the waterworks of Delhi, the occurrence of these scares became particularly focused.[29] At the constructing of the Cathedral at Shanghai, several persons were required for sacrifice, which prompted a general fear of venturing out at night lest one be requisitioned. Similar frights occurred at the construction of the Manchurian Railway, and in 1843 at the bridge at Halle. It was hypothesized that a man was buried beneath one of the towers of the Brooklyn Bridge[30] and that Lord Leigh walled a person (perhaps eight) into the bridge at Stoneleigh. Hartland concludes:

> No adequate explanation of legends and scares like these is feasible in the absence of a widespread custom which deeply impressed the popular imagination. Such a custom was not only common, it is not yet abandoned among barbarous nations.[31]

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[29] Poe's knowledge of far-reaching occurrences is evidenced in "The Premature Burial" when he mentions -- The stifling of the hundred and twenty-three prisoners at Calcutta, the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, the Earthquake at Lisbon and the Passage of the Beresina. This knowledge supports the plausibility of Poe's learning of scares such as at Halle in 1843.

[30] Hastings, p. 114.

[31] Ibid.

Even in Christian monasteries (e.g. Iona) premature burial has taken place. Skeletons are often found in the walls of churches in England and on the continent.[32] As the tradition reached the Middle Ages, the burials were conducted as mere custom.

> Numerous tales of burial in the wall whether inside or outside the church, in order to avoid the consequences of a pact with the devil, and of persons walled up alive by way of punishment, may have been founded on the custom when its origin had been forgotten.[33]

The foundation sacrifice stretches the bounds of time and place. It occurs frequently throughout the world right up past Poe's era. Poe may not have read any particular source work on the subject, but he certainly would have come across some mention of it, either in the periodicals of his day or the encyclopedias to which he had access (Chapter II).

Herodotus, Plutarch, and Pliny, all refer to sacrificial premature burial in the ground. The appearance of the motif in these writers is particularly significant as Poe was known to be familiar with their work.[34] Herodotus in his Histories, book seven, relates the following:

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[32] For further documented evidence of this, refer to Folklore, A Quarterly Review of Myth, Tradition, Institution, and Custom, London, Vol. 58, 1947, pp. 312-317 -- "The Man in the Wall."

[33] Hastings, p. 115.

[34] Professor Cambell states that Poe referred to Herodotus once, Pliny three times (once quoting him), and Plutarch six times.

> Having used these enchantments and many other besides on the river, they passed over it at the Edonian town of Nine Ways, by the bridges which they found thrown across it. Here learning that Nine ways was the name of the place, they buried alive that number of boys and maidens, children of the people of the country. To bury alive is a Persian custom; I have heard that when Xerxes' wife Amestius attained to old age she buried fourteen sons of notable Persians, as a thank-offering on her own behalf to the fabled God of the nether world.[35]

Plutarch also tells of burial alive referring to the Romans.

> ... from some prophecies in the Sibyl's books; put alive underground a pair of Greeks, one male, the other female; and likewise two Gauls, one of each sex, in the market called the beast market: continuing even to this day to offer to these Greeks and Gauls certain secret ceremonial observances in the month of November.[36]

Pliny mentions the above incident in his Natural History.[37]

E) Mistake or Intention

A wealth of lore surrounds burial alive by mistake, particularly while in a cataleptic trance. The motif in this instance, appears often in ballad, romance, and drama; but does not find itself expressed in ancient religious rituals or superstitions. This does not mean that it did not occur in ancient cultures. Henri Hauvette points out in his book

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[35] Herodotus, The Histories, trans. A. D. Godley, Harvard University Press (Massachusetts, 1957), Book VII.

[36] Plutarch, Lives, "Marcellus", trans. Dryden, Modern Library (London, 1893), p. 240.

[37] Pliny, Natural History, trans. Clough, Harvard University Press (Massachusetts, 1963), Book 28, p. 11.

on the subject:

> Assurément il n'a inventé la matière d'aucun de ses contes; à l'en croire, il s'est borné à reproduire les récits qu'il avait entendu raconter ici ou là, ...[38]

The tradition as it is passed to us, divides itself into two forms. The first is a mistaken burial of a person in a cataleptic state, the second is an induced form of catalepsy to cause mock death and premature interment to achieve some desired end. The motif must be followed through legends and tales which have been repeated time and time again with variation. A slight change will therefore be noted in my approach in concurrence with the necessity to relate these various tales.

Bouchut in his Traité des signes de la mort, recounted a story providing a background to the tales involving burial alive by mistake. It was set in 1706 and concerned a magistrate of Toulouse, his daughter Victorin, and a young military officer, M. Sézanne.

The magistrate had agreed to a marriage between M. Sézanne and his daughter, but when the young officer (called to duty) wished to take Victorin to America, the father refused. The daughter acquiesced to her father's wishes, and M. Sézanne was forced to leave on his trip alone. Shortly afterward, news that the officer had been killed reached the continent. Victorin was thrown into a fit of melancholy, but

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[38] Hauvette, p. 30.

when her father died, she married. The young woman died herself a few years later.

M. Sézanne, who was not dead but only a prisoner, escaped back to France, arriving the day of the burial of his beloved Victorin. He decided to kill himself but wished to see the woman he had loved one last time. While crying over the body, Victorin, prematurely buried, suddenly came back to life. The two got married and went to Italy. After four years they became nostalgic for France and returned home. Victorin's first husband saw and recognized his wife. He instituted proceedings to have the second marriage to Sézanne annuled and his own reinstated. The court sternly decided that Victorin should spend the rest of her days in a convent.

In Lenormand's Cause Célébres, Curieuses et Interessantes (1739), there appears a story[39] of two cousins whose marriage was arranged by their parents. Yielding to avarice rather than honour, the girl was forced by her mother and father to marry instead a rich man. Shortly afterward, the bride succumbed to a fit of melancholy (frequently a cause of catalepsy in popular legend) brought about by her ill-conceived betrothal. Her cousin unexpectedly revivified her the day she was buried when visiting her "corpse." The two lovers escaped secretly to England. They returned to Paris

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[39] This story is combined with Bouchut's to produce Poe's rendition in "The Premature Burial". The tale also recurs in "The Lady Buried Alive" from The Philadelphia Casket discussed in Chapter II.

ten years later and were unfortunately recognized, but fled rather than face the consequences of a court decision.

Matteo Bandello (1485-1562) tells his version of the legend known as "Les Amants de Venise". In that tale, Gerardo and Hélène were luckily brought together by a premature interment which proved the salvation of their marriage. Boccacio, in the Décameron, related the story of Catalina and Gentille, a tale which involved a similar variant of this type of burial by mistake. It is made particularly significant since Poe is said to have been familiar with Boccacio's work.[40]

In Florence, a legend of great popularity grew up around Ginevra Almieri.[41] Its first appearance was in a poem written by Antonio Velleti at the end of the 15th century. Ginevra, presumed dead but in a state of catalepsy, awakened to the sensation of being buried alive. She escaped her tomb rushing to both her mother's and husband's houses, but was there denied entrance because she was feared as a restless spirit. (Note the fear of the corpse motif). Ginevra was finally admitted at her ex-lover's house, and remained with him until they were discovered by her late husband. The church decided that Ginevra should be allowed to remain with he who had accepted her when she was believed dead. "Va, ma

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[40] Cambell, p. 190.

[41] Reference to this story occurs in "The Lady Buried Alive" in The Philadelphia Casket. This will further be discussed in Chapter II.

fille, et donne-toi du bon temps!"[42] In 1838, an opera based on the legend Guido et Ginevra, was performed. The story became so popular that as late as 1908 Jean Aicard told the tale once again in several poems.

> C'est l'histoire de Ginevra
> Qui comme morte on enterra ...[43]

Various versions of the mistaken motif are to be found in Spain centering around Maria Pidal and her "Juan et Angela;" a tale strikingly similar to Bandello's. In the 12th century in France, Marie de France wrote the "L'ai d'Eliduc" also dealing with this subject. Referring to the sources of the legends of mistaken burial alive, whether Indian or Oriental, Hauvette remarks:

> En réalité, les thèmes primitifs, très simples d'où dérivent les contes les plus répandus, appartiennent au fonds commun de préoccupations naturelles spontanées, qui obsèdent l'humanité sous tous les climats, dès qu'elle arrive à un certain stade de son développement intellectuel.[44]

The second form of premature burial by mistake involves those who intentionally induce a death-like state. The motif begins with the son of David, King Solomon of Israel, whose wife wished to leave him without scandal and so feigned death. After various tests, her husband believed her dead and so had

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[42] Hauvette, p. 74.

[43] Ibid., p. 76.

[44] Ibid., pp. 82-83.

her interred. Her lover came to rescue her from the tomb.[45]

In France, a story is told of the 13th century in the novel Marques de Romes. Cligès, the nephew of the emperor of Constantinople, had a love affair with his uncle's wife. The illegitimate lovers wished to remain together and so decided upon a mock death for the woman as a means of escape. Cligès took the necessary precautions as regards the woman's tomb.

> Or Cligès lui avait fait préparer un cercueil tel qu'elle y pouvait respirer librement et que la terre ne pouvait pas l'étouffer; ainsi la dame resta jusqu'à la nuit.[46]

An escape was successfully affected to a friend's home outside of Constantinople.

A classic tale in this vain is L'Aventures d'Habrocomès et d'Antheia by Xénophon d'Ephèse. Antheia truly loved Habrocomès and would die rather than be forced to marry Périlas. She accordingly asked her physician for a poison. She was given a narcotic which would only make her seem dead. The woman awoke in her tomb only to realize it was being robbed. Ironically, she herself was carried away by the roboers to be sold. The story relates to one of Boccacio's famous tales in the Décameron (II, 5) which told of a graverobber accidentally entombed, then

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[45] Ibid., p. 101. Poe was known to be familiar with the Bible.

[46] Ibid., p. 102. Note the similarity of the preparations taken against death by premature burial in this tale and in Poe's "The Premature Burial", as well as in Seba Smith's "The Life Preserving Coffin".

rescued by more would-be thieves.[47] Gentile Sermini, a devotee of Boccacio, detailed a story known as "Les Amants de Perouse". In this tale, yet another induced premature burial was successfully carried to completion.

"Les Amants de Sienne" by Masuccio de Salerne appeared in 1476. Luigi da Porto took Masuccio's tale and made it with certain variations, the basis for Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". Entitled "Guilietta e Romeo", it was set in Verona from 1301-1304. The two lovers were secretly married in a confessional booth. They were forced to part by circumstance, but a priest gave Guilietta a potion to make her appear dead in order to unite the two. Romeo learnt only of his wife's death, and committed suicide on her tomb. Guilietta awakened, saw Romeo, and herself died of grief. The two families of the couple, normally antagonistic, made peace over the cadavers.

Bandello published a second group of stories in 1554 and dealt with the same legend following da Porto closely. In France, Boisteau in 1559 translated Bandello, adding his own variation to the tale. Arthur Brooke in 1562 wrote the poem "Romeo and Juliet", and Lope de Vega wrote the counterpart in comic as opposed to tragic form.

As the tradition evolved to perfection, Shakespeare's

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[47] We will note the recurrence of the rescue of the prematurely buried by robbers later in the periodic literature.

"Romeo and Juliet" appeared.[48] The events were similar to those described in Luigi da Porto's tale and the legends preceding. Juliet became a "Poor living corpse, closed in a dead man's tomb",[49] and the play as a whole excelled as tragedy.

> For never was a story more of woe
> Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.[50]

The motif did not disappear with Shakespeare. Echoes could be found in the pastoral novel of Honoré d'Urfé — L'Astrée. In this work, the circumstances surrounding the cataleptic state refer us to the versions of the legend examined earlier, where a lethargy and not a chemical induces the semblance of death. This variation was found in "Lettre de Dulis à son amis" in verse and "Fin de l'histoire de Dulis ..." in prose, both by Sébastien Mercier (1778). Victor Hugo (with whom Poe was familiar) and Emile Zola, finally included the motif in Angelo, Tyran de Padoue and La Mort d'Olivier Becaille.

The legends discussed provide a solid background to the aspect of the motif of premature burial described. Poe most assuredly was in contact with variations of these

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[48] Professor Cambell states that Poe knew the work well.

[49] William Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet", ed. Hankins, Penguin Books (Baltimore, 1972), p. 29.

[50] Ibid., pp. 309-310.

legends. "Romeo and Juliet" he knew well, and the periodic literature of his time makes actual reference to a number of the tales. Even in Poe's own work ("The Assignation", for example), we may note textual similarities[51] with the historical traditions of the legends discussed.

The preceding examination into the background of the motif of premature burial has been necessarily sporadic. It has been especially so regarding material with which Poe may not have been familiar. The purpose of this paper is not to study the motif itself, but more important, to examine it within the work of Poe. What has been most significant, therefore, is the classification of the precedent variations of the motif in preparation for the analysis of the tales of Poe.

Before delving into Poe's work, it is crucial to detail the motif of premature burial as it appears in Poe's era. In the America of the first half of the 19th century, numerous references are found to the motif, often as Poe himself had used it.

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[51] The Italian setting, the mysterious love affair, and the double suicide of "The Assignation" place it in this context.

CHAPTER II

THE MOTIF IN POE'S ERA

In the present section, I will discuss the motif as it generally appears in Poe's era, with particular emphasis on the periodic literature with which Poe was familiar. A discussion of the general motif will precede a description of the individual periodic tales and essays.

In Poe's time the fear of premature burial was a popular preoccupation. The 1830 Encyclopaedia Americana[1] yields excellent proof of this general concern. Under the heading "Burial" we read:

> Great care should be taken not to bury the body too soon after death. The ancient nations endeavored to satisfy themselves, by many precautions, that death had really taken place. The ancient Egyptians embalmed their dead; the Romans cut off one of their fingers, before they burnt them; other nations repeatedly washed and annointed them. Interments should never be allowed before the most undoubted symptoms of putrefaction have taken place. We should wait at least three days in summer, unless the hot weather requires a quicker interment. It would be well to introduce the custom of exposing the corpse to the inspection of a person, who should carefully and repeatedly examine it, and none should be interred without the certificate of this inspector.[2]

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[1] Poe is said to have drawn from the Encyclopaedia Americana for his story "Some Words With a Mummy". Lucille King, Arthur Hobson Quinn and Burton Pollin concur on Poe's use of the work.

[2] Encyclopaedia Americana, ed. Lieber, Carey and Lea Publishers (Philadelphia, 1830), p. 333.

It is clear from the above, that the editors of the Encyclopaedia feared burial alive by mistake, and thought that the public should take great care in ascertaining positive death. Under "Trance", the editors mention the burial of people in the past, "under the supposition that death had actually taken place."[3] Further references to symptoms concerned with mistaken burial are found under "Catalepsy," "Asphyxia," and "Death."

Both in the Encyclopedia Brittanica[4] and in Johnson's Dictionary,[5] brief descriptions of catalepsy are given. Brewster's Edinburgh Encyclopedia[6] contains a long section on burial which relates of premature interment in China. Poe is known to have read various medical treatises including Bland's Chancury Reports, Haxall's Diseases of the Abdomen, and the British and Foreign Medical Review.[7] It is entirely conceivable that in one of these he may have run across descriptions of cataleptic burial such as are noted in "Passages From the

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[3] Ibid., p. 316.

[4] Encyclopedia Brittanica, 1810 edition, Archibald Constable and Co., Edinburgh.

[5] Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, 1756 and 1832 editions. Poe refers at least once to this source.

[6] Brewster's Edinburgh Encyclopedia, 1830 edition. See footnote 5, Chapter I.

[7] Poe wrote notices for the last two of these in the Southern Literary Messenger.

Diary of a Late Physician" (discussed later).

References to the motif of premature burial in these works posit both Poe's familiarity and the familiarity of Poe's era with the motif. They further signal a widespread circulation of fears and realities concerning burial while living, particularly in a cataleptic trance.

Catalepsy, Poe's most frequent state of premature interment, as well as the most popularized in Poe's era, is discussed in detail in Blackwood's "Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician -- The Thunder-Struck".[8] Discussion takes the form of a tale, told supposedly with the element of scientific truth, being the first person narration of a doctor.

The story is of a young woman Agnes, who, believing the apocalypse at hand in a lightening storm, enters a state of catalepsy induced by extreme fear. During the attempt to cure the ailing woman, the doctor relates the symptoms and history of the disease.

> Van Swieten vividly and picturesquely enough compares it to that condition of the body, which according to ancient fiction, was produced in the beholder by the appalling site of Medusa's head -- ... The medicinal writers of antiquity have left evidence of the existence of this disease in their day -- but given the most obscure and unsatisfactory descriptions of it ... More modern science, however, distinctly recognizes the disease as one peculiar and independent; and is

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[8] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (Edinburgh, 1832), Vol. 32, p. 289. Poe mentions this source in Graham's Magazine, Vol. 18, p. 252.

> borne out by numerous unquestionable cases of catalepsy recorded by some of the most eminent members of the profession.[9]

Further instances "not likely ... met with"[10] are related. They involve a lady seized with fits spasmodically, a case in which "the senses were transferred to the pit of the stomach,"[11] and a Spanish monk who originally frightened into trance, awakes in the midst of his funeral obsequies. The particular discussion is ended on the comment that the disease generally makes its appearance among women (true to Poe's use).

The physician calls in a friend to examine Agnes, and is advised whatever occurs to make certain of death before burial. The warning is significant of the widespread fear of such interment.

> 'I have heard some frightful instances of premature burial in cases like this', said the Dean. 'I hope in heaven that you will not think of committing her remains to the earth, before you are satisfied, beyond a doubt that life is extinct'.[12]

As the tale comes to a close, Agnes miraculously returns to

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[9] Ibid., p. 289.

[10] Ibid., p. 290.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 296.

life, but only long enough to tell her fiancee to "prepare"[13] for death. She dies shortly afterward, and her fiancee succumbs a year later.

The Philadelphia Casket, under the heading "The Lady Buried Alive", merely repeats a tale found in the Causes Celebres -- "we find the following romantic story."[14] The tale related is indeed the same as Lenormand's (see footnote 39, Chapter I), with slight variation, involving a mistaken premature burial turned to the benefit of two lovers. The editors of The Casket tell the reader that the story is but an imperfect version of a legend in the region of Florence during the plague of 1460. They further relate the source as the tale of Ginevra Almieri which has been discussed in Chapter I (see footnote 41).

The motif as mistake appearing in the background section in Chapter I, is related directly via periodic literature to Poe by "The Lady Buried Alive." It is seldom that such an opportunity is given, to infer knowledge of the historical background by Poe.

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[13] This diary could certainly have given Poe "food for thought" to draw upon in regard to his "Valdemar", "Mesmeric Revelation", "The Power of Words", "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion". All of these tales represent a consciousness in death-like states, or a visit to the land of the dead. The death and then recovery from it, the ghosts Agnes had seen in her cataleptic state (perhaps those of the death world), and her return to life to warn her lover "prepare" all find echo in Poe's "life in death" tales.

[14] Philadelphia Casket, 1827, p. 340.

"The Dead Alive"[15] is a tale related by one of two young men who climb Mount Saint Bernard in Switzerland. Caught in a dense snow storm, the narrator sits down and is frozen into a cataleptic state. While in this condition, he dreams he is in Hades, and sees various figures -- Cerebus,[16] skeletons and decomposed bodies. Slowly the narrator revives from his trance; his visions are explained as a result of mistaken premature burial.

> I was found covered with snow, and supposed to be dead. My body was consequently consigned to the repository for the departed. One of the dogs which had followed the melancholy procession, directed by his strong instinct, had been shut up with me unobserved by his keepers. He continued to lick me until animation was restored ... In the receptacle of the dead already described, there are a great number of bodies in different stages of decay, in the process of which flesh and bones gradually consume together.[17]

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[15] Godey's Lady's Book, XII, 1833.

[16] There is a distinct similarity between the dog in this story and the horrible part it plays in the narrator's nightmare, and Pym's dog and his reaction to it when buried in the hold of the ship. The fact that "Pym" was written in 1838 and this story in 1833, and that Poe mentioned "The Dead Alive" in "How to Write a Blackwood Article", lends plausibility to Poe's use of the dog image. "Pym" reads:

> At my feet crouched a fierce lion of the tropics. Suddenly his wild eyes opened and fell upon me. Stifling in a paroxym of terror, I at last found myself partially awake.

"The Dead Alive" reads:

> ... when what was my consternation at beholding the head of a huge dog next to mine, with a tongue lolling out ... that it absolutely appalled me. I was laying on my back, and so powerless as to be altogether unable to rise ...

[17] Godey's Lady's Book, "The Dead Alive", p. 196.

The style of the narration is strikingly similar to Poe's method. The events occur as if true to reality, but then are rationally explained away by a detailed and critical evaluation of what has supposedly preceded.

In "The Sexton of Cologne",[18] a burgomaster loses his wife Adelaide to illness and has her buried with jewelled splendour. The sexton of the church in which she is buried is in grave financial difficulty as his wife and recently born child have nothing to eat. Driven to desperation for the safety of his family, he decides to steal the jewels buried with Adelaide. The vault "with its dark associations"[19] (Chapter I, fear) terrifies him while he breaks open her coffin. As he attempts to remove some jewels from the hand of the corpse, it grasps his own. The sexton flees in terror. Adelaide's husband and a servant, harkened to the church to investigate, see the "corpse" at the altar.

> 'Ah!' replied a faint voice, 'you buried me alive, and, but for this wine, I had perished from exhaustion. Come up to me dear Adolf, I am no shadow'.[20]

The servant warns his master away, but the husband rushes to his wife.

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[18] Godey's Lady's Book, "The Sexton of Cologne", 1833, pp. 54-56.

[19] Ibid., p. 55.

[20] Ibid., p. 56.

> It was indeed, Adelaide that he held in his eager embrace -- the warm and the living Adelaide -- who had been buried for dead in her long trance, and had only escaped from the grave by the sacrilegious doings of -- the Sexton of Cologne.[21]

The Sexton as robber, saves the prematurely interred from certain death. The same pattern was noted in Chapter I when dealing with the background to the motif. (See Chapter I, footnote 47).

In periodic literature, many sources specifically relating to individual Poe tales of burial alive are discovered. "The Premature Burial" is one such story that finds its sources in the periodicals of the first half of the nineteenth century.

"Superstition," a tale written by Sedley, appears in The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Journal Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts.[22] The story revolves around a girl named Maria who "In early childhood ... fell into the hands of a nurse who used to enforce her commands by awakening her terrors both natural and supernatural",[23] and her frail friend Julia, who believes herself fated to an early death. Julia is afraid not only of dying young, but of being buried alive. She exacts a promise of Maria that her body (presumed

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[21] Ibid.

[22] The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Journal Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts, "Superstition", 1831, p. 284.

[23] Ibid.

dead) would be watched over until no possibility of life existed.

Maria learns one evening that her friend is fatally ill and goes to her bedside. Julia's final words are, "Remember your promise"[24] (concerning the positive identification of death). Keeping her word, Maria stays with the corpse alone all night. The next morning, Maria's father finds his daughter "shrunk away into a corner, her eyes started from their sockets, her hands clasped together convulsively"[25] -- stone dead.

The same fear from which the narrator suffers in "The Premature Burial" is noted here in Julia's irrational fear of premature interment. The fear of the corpse evidence in the background of the motif in Chapter I is seen in Maria's death from fright.

> Coffins stood round like open presses,
> That shaw'd the dead in their last dresses.[26]

The above quote attributed to Tom O'Shanter heads an interesting story entitled "Doings of the Dead." The narrator of the tale is on a trip by stagecoach, when he is attacked by two men who drag him to a gothically decorated

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] The Knickerbocker, "Doings of the Dead", I, May 1833, p. 294.

cathedral within the recesses of a valley. Once inside, a priest leads the narrator into the church's burial vault where he is conducted throughout. He views the dead in horrifying positions in and on their coffins depicting their final agonies after being buried (as if interred while living).

> They say the dead lie still until the day of Judgement -- 'tis false! The moment the vault-doors are closed they all assume the same form and characteristics as when living.[27]

The narrator "thought (himself) buried before (his) time --"[28] "Terrible -- Wild"[29] music is played from the church organ reaching a frightening pitch. The narrator is about to be decapitated when he awakes to discover he was but dreaming and the coach has arrived at its destination.

The tale is related to Poe's in the picturing of the dead in agonized positions in their coffins. There is a similar tableau in "The Premature Burial", when the narrator believes he sees all the coffins opened and the dead within. Once again a fear of the dead is noted within the tale, a fear that precipitates (as in Poe's narrative) the nightmare vision that is the story.

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[27] Ibid., p. 297.

[28] Ibid., p. 298.

[29] Ibid.

Although he did not think highly of Seba Smith judging from his article about her -- "The simple truth is, that Mr. Downing (Seba Smith) never committed a greater mistake in his life than when he fancied himself a poet ..."[30] Poe probably used the article preceding "The Life-Preserving Coffin"[31] as well as the poem itself, in the writing of "The Premature Burial." The following appeared in The Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine:

> At the late fair of the American Institute held at Niblo's Garden New York, there was exhibited an article called a 'life-preserving coffin'; invented by Mr. Eisenbrant of Baltimore ... In order to guard against the occurrence of a burial before life is extinct, the inventor has arranged springs and levers on its inside, whereby its inmate, by the least motion of either head or hand, will instantly cause the coffin lid to fly open. The inventor also advises families who may feel disposed to make use of his life-preserving coffin to have their tombs or vaults constructed with a lock upon the door, that will open either from the inside or the outside ... He would also have the tomb provided with a bell that would be rung by its inmates.[32]

Along with the article appeared Mrs. Smith's twelve stanza poem part of which reads:

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[30] Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Works, ed. Stedman & Woodberry, The Colonial Co. (New York, 1914), "Seba Smith," Vol. 8, pp. 304-305.

[31] The article and poem were pointed out in an essay by W. T. Bandy, "A Source of Poe's 'The Premature Burial'" appearing in American Literature. Bandy as well as Arthur Hobson Quinn make reference to the other two stories I have alluded to as regards "The Premature Burial."

[32] Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine, May-January, 1844, p. 36.

'Arise, arise, O husband!
The dear lost child is found;
The solemn bell is ringing;
I hear the heavenly sound'.[33]

The narrator in Poe's tale effects all the precautions[34] above mentioned to insure against his being interred alive. The fact that such an item as a life-preserving coffin was invented and displayed (or at least we can suppose it so), gives very definite credence to the far-reaching appearance of premature burial (and the fear of it), in Poe's era.

The sources of "The Pit and the Pendulum" have been well documented[35] by various literary researchers. I wish to discuss a number of these and add a source of my own. The vast number of linked burials again supports a widespread appearance of the motif in Poe's era.

Under the heading "Original Moral Tales," an unsigned

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Note precautions also taken in Marques de Romes discussed in the general background covered in the first chapter. See footnote 46, Chapter I.

[35] The sources of this story have been derived principally from Arthur Hobson Quinn and Margaret Alterton. I have not included all sources for the sake of brevity. Of particular interest would be Juan Antonio Llorente's History of the Spanish Inquisition, signalled in Modern Language Notes -- Vol. XLVII, June 1933, "An additional source for Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'." The article by D'Israeli is not mentioned as a source anywhere to my knowledge. I came across it while perusing Curiosities of Literature.

story "Solitary Confinement,"[36] is found in The New-York Mirror. It concerns an Englishman who was "immured" alone in a dungeon for life, apparently as a form of punishment. The narration assumes the form of diary which is rationalized thusly:

> Someone when I am dead and mouldered, even here where I am now sitting, will see the sheet; will know of the anguish that now heaves and swells my bosom, and blinds my eyes; will regard the heap of ashes at his feet, and breath a sigh of commiseration at my dreadful fate.[37]

The narrator describes his sensations being entombed in the darkness "never" to "see sunshine again."[38] He attempts to retain his sanity under the depressing conditions in which he is imprisoned. At length, there being no means of escape, the narrator "finished his existence"[39] in the dungeon.

The story resembles "The Pit and the Pendulum" in the rational attempt to evaluate the sepulchre, in the emotive description of feeling, "Dreadful, still lonely; a monstrous monotony,"[40] and in the solitary consignment to a darkened dungeon which is ultimately designed as a sepulchre.

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[36] The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Journal Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts, "Solitary Confinement," Vol. IX, May 12, 1832, No. 45.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

"The Iron Shroud"[41] is a finely crafted story drawing close to Poe in its delineation of terror. Vivenzio is put in a "vast cage" and left to die by an inquisitorial prince. The narration is not in the first person, but still achieves a detailed description of Vivenzio's state of mind while suffering the horrors of his tormentor. "... but the solitude of the desert, the silence of the tomb, are not so still and deep as the oppressive desolation by which he was encompassed.[42] The silence of the dungeon, "seemed prophetic of his fate, of the living grave that had been prepared for him."[43]

The protagonist attempts rationally to evaluate his tomb. He tries to find out how his food is replaced without the main doors of the cell opening. He passes sleepless nights in the unsuccessful attempt to comprehend the means by which his warden accomplishes this. The prison shrinks in size each day, and Vivenzio though persistent, is impotent to cease its progression. He reads an inscription etched on the wall by the designer of the dungeon, telling how its maker, had ironically been its first victim. The inscription warns:

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[41] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, Vol. 28, July-December, 1830, pp. 364-371.

[42] Ibid., p. 365.

[43] Ibid., p. 364.

> Miserable wretch, whoe'er thou art, that readest these lines, fall on thy knees, and invoke as I have done, his sustaining mercy, who alone can nerve thee to meet the vengeance of Tolfi; aimed with his terrific engine which, in a few hours, must crush you, as it will the needy wretch who made it.[44]

The representative alteration of the prisoner's pleasant dreams on the first night in the dungeon, to horrifying nightmares during his final days, are outlined by the narration. At the last, the prison had shrunk so that even his bed was no more. "It stood before him, the visible semblance of a funeral couch or bier!"[45] As Vivenzio is crushed, the tolling of an "enormous bell" signals the final constricting of the cell. "He was horribly crushed by the ponderous roof and collapsing sides -- and the flattened bier was his Iron Shroud."[46]

The tale is written well and to great effect. It is sure, had Poe read it, (and we have every reason to believe he had), the story would have made a forceful impression on him. It resembles "The Pit and the Pendulum" in the narrator's attempt to escape his fate, in the detailing of the prisoner's feelings of horror, and also in the inevitable shrinking of the prison.

"The Man in the Bell"[47] relates how a boy gets trapped

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[44] Ibid., p. 367.

[45] Ibid., p. 371.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, "The Man in the Bell", November, 1821, pp. 373-375.

in a bell tower by accident. The bell is being rung and he is forced to lie on the floor with its swinging back and forth missing him by a thread's-length. The boy fears the floor will cave in and is terrified of the shrieking noise, but is forced to remain in this position for a horrible half hour.

> I only retained the sensation of agonizing terror. Every moment I saw the bell sweep within an inch of my face; and my eyes -- I could not close them, though to look at the object was bitter as death -- followed instinctively in its oscillating progress until it came back again. It was in vain I said to myself that it could come no nearer at any future swing than it did at first; every time it descended, I endeavored to shrink into the very floor to avoid being buried under the down-sweeping mass; and then reflecting on the danger of pressing too weightily on my frail support, would come up again as far as I dared.[48]

The victim escapes, is thoroughly shaken, and retires to the country where he recuperates to some degree. He cannot rid himself, however, of a slight shock at the pealing of church bells.

The story is mentioned in a letter to T. W. White[49] proving Poe familiar with the tale. The swinging pendulum and the boy's reaction to it, (moving away and then toward it), relates to the pendulum and the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum."

An accident once again leads to the entombment of a

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[48] Ibid., p. 374.

[49] John Ostrom, The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, 1948), Vol. I, p. 58.

Dr. -- in "The Involuntary Experimentalist."[50] Passing by a raging fire, the physician offers to help quell the blaze. By an unfortunate turn of circumstance, he is trapped in a large copper kettle and there endures the pains of an inescapable tomb which gets hotter and hotter.

> -- there was nothing to hold on by, and I reached back to the little spot of level footing in the bottom, conscious, for the first time, that I was in a trap, out of which there was no escape ... Expecting each moment to be my last, with the instinct of one who awaits a blow which he cannot avoid, I shut my eyes and stooped my head, shrinking together as may well be imagined, and trembling in every limb.[51]

Just on the verge of expiration, withstanding temperatures greater than ever before recorded, the physician is rescued.

The rational survey of the Dr.'s prison and the attempt to escape death, as well as the last minute salvation, remind us strongly of Poe's later tale.

According to Killis Cambell,[52] Poe was familiar with D'Israeli's Curiosities of Literature. In an article entitled "Inquisition" in the first series of curiosities, I have located a possible source of "The Pit and the Pendulum" and an

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[50] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, "The Involuntary Experimentalist", XLII, October 1837, p. 487.

[51] Ibid.

[52] "Poe's Reading," p. 195. Ruth Hudson in a critical essay, also writes upon the relationship of Poe and D'Israeli in American Literature, VII, pp. 402-416. In a letter, Poe himself mentions having corresponded with D'Israeli.

instance of the motif of interment as punishment.

> Enclosed in this dungeon I could not even find space enough to turn myself about; I suffered so much that I felt my brain disordered. I frequently asked myself, am I really Don Balthazar Orobio, who used to walk about Seville at my pleasure, who so greatly enjoyed myself with my wife and my children? I often imagined that all my life had only been a dream, and that I had really been born in this dungeon. The only amusement I could invent was metaphysical disputations. I was at once opponent, respondent, and praeses.[53]

The "disputations" mentioned remind us of Poe's narrator, and his absurd calculations upon the size of his crypt. The questioning of identity and the nervous tone of the passage are echoed in the narrator's struggle (in "The Pit and the Pendulum") away from the pendulum one minute, and his smile at its inevitable descent the next.

"The Cask of Amontillado" bears a striking resemblance to J. T. Headley's "A Man Built in a Wall."[54] A narrator relates of his visit to an Italian region at festival time. He enters the town of San Giovanni and examines the withered form of a man walled up in the church of San Lorenzo.

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[53] I. D'Israeli, Curiosities of Literature, Edward Moxon Publishers (London, 1841), p. 60.

[54] "A Man Built in a Wall" was located in perusal of The Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine and has since been verified in an article by Schick -- "The Origin of 'The Cask of Amontillado'," American Literature, VI, pp. 18-21. Poe had reviewed Headley's "Letters from Italy" in the Broadway Journal, 2 (August 9, 1845), p. 75 and we thus may assume Poe familiar with the author.

> As the door swung open I recoiled a step in horror, for there stood, upright, a human skeleton, perfect in all its parts, staring upon me with its dead eye-sockets.[55]

The viewer is horrified at the appearance of the skeleton. "The whole attitude and aspect give one the impression of a death of agony."[56] With the narrator is a friend, a physician, who very carefully analyzes the remains. "... his voice was low and solemn, and as if he himself had seen the living burial, said he, 'That man died of suffocation, and he was built up alive in that wall."[57] The doctor reconstructs the terrible events of the night of the premature burial stressing the words "painful" and "suffering." On a dark evening, the victim was trapped, and brought to the church where he was tortured and the crime concealed. Little by little, each part of his body was covered.

> Yet up went the mason work till it reached the mouth, and the roughest fragment was jammed into the teeth, and fastened there with the mortar -- and still rose, till nothing but the pale, white forehead was visible in the opening.[58]

The narrator leaves the church with his friend, and soon forgets the horrifying sight in contemplation of the beautiful

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[55] Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine, "A Man Built in a Wall", Vol. I, 1844, p. 78. See footnote 32, Chapter I).

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., p. 79.

[58] Ibid.

scenery surrounding him.

The similarities between the tale and Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" are manifold. Both involve a slow methodical and cruel walling up; in both the crime is completed with success.

"Some Words With a Mummy" has its germination in several sources, one of which is "Letter From a Revived Mummy."[59] A mummy describes how, after receiving a blow rendering him "insensible", he spends a hundred years in the vaults of the museum at Brussels, finally falling into the hands of a scientifically oriented man who --

> entertained the idea that life was but dormant, not extinct in my frame, and that by a little coaxing and gentle measures, she might be wheedled forth from her hiding place.[60]

Revived by means of the galvanic battery, the mummy narrates his utter disillusionment with the world as it exists. He is like "Aeneas under a Cloud."[61] The mummy wishes he could return to the museum: "I often wish myself again in the vaults of the museum at Brussels, and actually contracted by

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[59] The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Journal Devoted to Literature and the Fine Arts, "Letter From a Revived Mummy", January 21, 1832, p. 227. Reference to this tale was derived from Lucille King's article on Poe's sources.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

conveyance there in three days, but was solemnly assured that there was no museum there ..."[62] -- but cannot even locate his past home.

The story line is quite similar to Poe's tale. Both mummies are revivified by means of a galvanic charge, and both are disillusioned with the "modern" world. Each had fallen into a state of catalepsy, mistakenly buried by his comrades.

In "Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician",[63] in one of the footnotes to the story entitled "The Boxer", I have located another instance of revivification (though supposed) by means of a battery.

> The first time that the galvanic shock was conveyed to him will never, I dare say, be forgotten by anyone present. We all shrunk from the table in consternation, with the momentary belief that we had positively brought the man back to life; for he suddenly sprung up into a sitting posture -- his arms waved wildly. The color rushed into his cheeks -- his lips were drawn apart, so as to show all his teeth -- ... one gentleman present, who happened to be nearest to the upper part of the body, was almost knocked down with the violent blow he received from the left arm.[64]

The tale concerns a man recently hung, but the type

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, "Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician", Vol. 32, 1832, p. 279. In Poe's "The Premature Burial" the story of Mr. Stapelton is reminiscent here; both men are pilfered from the grave and "revived" with a charge.

[64] Ibid., p. 291.

of revivification procedure is similar to Poe's story. A blow is dealt to one of the spectators in both tales as a result of the cadaver returning to life.

A man "dies" in "The Burial Alive"[65] but still retains all his senses. Though he is living, the narrator cannot bring this fact to the attention of those burying him and he is thus interred by mistake. The actual burial is given minute detail for effect. His coffin --

> ... was lowered, and rested on the bottom of the grave -- the cords were dropped upon the lid ... Soon after, a few handfuls of earth were thrown upon the coffin -- Then there was another pause -- after which the shovel was employed, and the sound of the rattling mould, as it covered me, was far more tremendous than thunder. But I could make no effort. The sound gradually became less and less, and by a surging reverberation in the coffin, I knew that the grave was filled up, and that the sexton was treading in the earth, slapping the grave with the flat of his spade. This too ceased, then all was silent.[66]

Grave robbers[67] enter the earth and steal the narrator's body shortly after he is interred. He is given to a group of physicians who, by means of a galvanic battery, bring the narrator from his lethargy.

"Some Words With a Mummy" is similar to this story in

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[65] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, "The Burial Alive", October 1821, pp. 262-263.

[66] Ibid., p. 262.

[67] See footnote 47, Chapter I, for robbers saving the prematurely interred. Also the "Sexton of Cologne", p. 24. See footnote 63 this chapter as well, for further relation to other story patterns.

the means of revivification, and in the manner which the narrator, lying on a table, watches what is being done to him by those who imagine him to be senseless and dead. The sensations of actual burial vividly described, make this tale significant in terms of the general motif as well as the individual story.

The motif of premature burial was widely circulated through the periodical literature with which Poe was familiar. I have not attempted to illustrate all the sources for Poe's tales involving the motif; instead I have chosen, what to me, are representative examples of the motif and era. This literature as well as Poe's, reflects the classifications of the motif as discussed in Chapter I. Although Poe often borrows the subject material of his tales, it is the use of that material which places him above those from whom he borrowed. This will be discussed in Chapter IV.

As we progress to Chapter III, it is important to keep the material from this section in mind. I will discuss the irrelevance of the psycho-analytic analysis of the motif in light of the general background, and more especially considering the nature of the periodic literature in which Poe was immersed.

CHAPTER III

THE MOTIF AND THE PSYCHO-ANALYTIC INTERPRETATION

Biographers, psychologists and psychiatrists have often typically assumed that Poe's use of various motifs is necessarily derived from a "tortured" soul. This interpretation neglects the well of information concerning the era in which Poe matured, his literary predecessors, and the periodic literature of his age.[1] In relation to the motif of premature burial, Chapters I and II have discussed the factors normally ignored. We can realize that the motif did not spring from Poe's own conception but was derived from various sources and analogues.

Gericault in 1819 kept cadavers lying in his studio to paint "The Raft of Medusa" as did Delacroix in his "Barque de Don Juan." According to Frank Davidson, "beauty tainted with pain, corruption, horror and death was ... all

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[1] The neglect of which I speak on the part of those interested in Poe's "tortured" aspect, is valid for the psychologist-psychiatrist's own purposes. It is not a tenable position for me, however, as regards a literary approach to Poe. Their methods do not jive with a study such as this paper represents; a study into the extra-psychological significance of the motif of premature burial.

over Europe a century ago."[2] In this light Poe was a "historian" whose reports of death, vaults, decay, and corruption reflect the time in which he lived. Mario Praz[3] states that Poe's terror was not so much of the soul -- but of Germany and several countries. This must remain crucial and representative in an attempt to locate the sources of literature in literature, rather than in a psychological evaluation of the author.

> If the use of horror in fiction can be taken as an indication of horror in the mind of the author, then most of the tale writers of the first half of the 19th century were verging on insanity.[4]

Those who would relate the motif of premature burial to Poe's state of mind, must attach their all-inclusive evaluations to the tale writers we have witnessed in Chapter II, to the background figures in Chapter I, as well as the many more that

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[2] Edward Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, 1957).

[3] Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, Oxford University Press (London, 1933).

[4] Napier Wilt, "Poe's Attitude Toward His Tales: A New Document", Modern Philology, XXV, 105, August, 1927. One might add to this Walt Whitman's comments on Poe, particularly significant in this context, as they focus on Poe as representative of an era which often focused on the macabre. From The Shock of Recognition, p. 424:
"The lush and the weird that have taken such extraordinary possession of the nineteenth century ... the inevitable tendency of poetic culture to morbidity, abnormal beauty -- the sickliness of all technical thought or refinement in itself ..."

have not been mentioned.

Dr. Maudsley, the medical superintendent of the Manchester Royal Lunatic Hospital in 1860, is one of the first men to stress the import of Poe's biography on his creative work. He considered the period of Mrs. Poe's gestation important, for "Before the child is born, it is certain that its after constitution may be seriously affected by its mother's state of mind."[5] Numerous doctors and biographers continue up to the present day the trend of which Dr. Maudsley was a part.[6] The most important study of Poe in this vain, is Marie Bonaparte's (1933) psycho-analytic interpretation. Freud, in a foreword to the book, says: "... Marie Bonaparte, has shone the light of psycho-analysis on the life and work of a great writer with pathologic trends ..."[7] Bonaparte is particularly significant to this paper, as she specifically deals with the motif of premature burial through a variety of tales.

Mrs. Bonaparte gives psycho-analytic meaning to the motif, when discussing a scene in "A. Gordon Pym" in which the protagonist is shut up in the hold of a ship.

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[5] Philip Young, "The Early Psychologists and Poe", American Literature, Vol. 22, 1950-1951, p. 447.

[6] This group includes Dr. Robertson, D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Krutch, and to my mind, Daniel Hoffman.

[7] Marie Bonaparte, The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe, The Hogarth Press (London, 1971), p. xi.

> ... like the child in the womb; and the protracted, tortured story of his imprisonment there, corresponds to what is frequently met in psycho-analysis, namely, a womb phantasy, the morbid anxiety connected with which expresses its opposite, the wish. For as Freud says: 'It may be added that for a man who is impotent (that is, who is inhibited by the threat of castration) the substitute for copulation is a phantasy of returning into his mother's womb'. Poe impotent, must have been specifically prone to this phantasy, so admirably expressed in the premature burial situations he so frequently depicts.[8]

The motif of premature burial (or what it is symbolic of) even in psycho-analysis has a distinct heritage stretching back through time.

> ... phantasies of the sort are the common heritage of man. They figure in the dreams and other unconscious constructions of adults, as in the activities and behavior of children. They should not, however, be confused with biological tendencies to regress to the foetal condition, a tendency doubtless common to all creatures which have experienced an amniotic existence. This tendency reveals itself most clearly in the periodic need to sleep in darkness and at rest and often, even in the prenatal condition, another manifestation of which would be coitus, that partial return to the female body -- complete return being affected by one sperm cell. The penis only achieves a semi -- and temporary return to our prenatal bliss and the body, as it were, by proxy, attains it in voluptuous pleasure.[9]

If we agree with Bonaparte that everyone manifests the desire to return to the womb; what then is the particular advantage of describing Poe's focus on the subject? His focus can only be derived from "the common heritage of man" -- and although this may illuminate our common psycho-analytic heritage, it

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[8] Ibid., p. 312.

[9] Ibid., p. 585.

does not shed light on Poe's literary work.

> Yet although the literary man may be incompetent to judge of such matters, he nevertheless might feel like Benjamin Franklin 'This doctrine tho' it might be true, was not very useful' -- not useful, that is for literary purposes.[10]

We may, at the extreme become confused, a problem I have experienced with Bonaparte's evaluation of "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym." There are so many symbols with which Poe's mother is connected, that the symbols lose their significance if for no other reason than by their very mass. She says the sea, the ship, the hold, the dog, the dead corpse, Peters, the bottle, the death ship, the turtle, the shark's teeth, the pole, the island, the hill on the island, the chasms on the island, the white monster with the scarlet teeth, the shrouded figure, and the snow all relate to Poe's mother.

One of the latest books on Poe by Daniel Hoffman,[11] manifests psycho-analytic leanings which once again lead to confusion. In this case, the discussion is interesting but not particularly informative. Hoffman uses the example of Houdini and his constant efforts to escape entombment -- "He (Poe) might have found a real-life counterpart to the sufferer in 'The Premature Burial'."[12] Menninger is quoted on

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[10] Phillip Young, "The Early Psychologists and Poe", American Literature, Vol. 22 (1950-1951), p. 451.

[11] Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe, Doubleday and Co. (New York, 1973).

[12] Ibid., p. 216.

Houdini --

> Coupled with this, unconsciously, is the fact that he had an extraordinary attachment for his mother which strongly affected his entire life ...[13]

Hoffman's conclusion is certainly ambiguous.

> Alas the poor psychotic imagination, to which everything that counts for anything becomes both itself and its opposite. Death is an image of birth, birth of death, and suicide and murder partake of each other's character in the throes of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, the id and the superego, the self and the world.[14]

Death does not literally mean birth, nor birth death. The equation has been tempered by an illusive unconscious. Hoffman must have (or believed he had) put his finger on that unconscious before tackling Poe; I have not. Allen Tate is pertinent here in speaking of the psycho-analytically inclined.

> To these ingenious persons, Poe's works have no intrinsic meaning; taken together they make up a <u>dossier</u> for the analyst to peruse before Mr. Poe steps into his office for analysis.[15]

I must agree with Floyd Stovall in his summation of the requirements for the comprehension of Poe.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 218.

[15] Allen Tate, "Our Cousin Mr. Poe", from <u>Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays</u>, Prentice Hall (New Jersey, 1967). Perhaps Poe's own comment is valid here. From "The Rationale of Verse" --

> "In one case out of a hundred a point is excessively discussed because it is obscure, in the ninety-nine remaining it is obscure because excessively discussed." (908)

> Some of his poems and tales are difficult, but they can be understood without the help of twentieth century psychology or any greater learning than what can be found in the literature and the reference works to which he had access.[16]

Bonaparte's study of the psycho-analytic heritage rather than of Poe's literary work is illustrated by the following chart[17] in which literary sources are juxtaposed with unconscious symbols. In this visual context, the source material manifests the same unconscious characteristics supposedly found in Poe.

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[16] Floyd Stovall, "The Conscious Art of Edgar Poe," from Edgar Poe the Poet, University of Virginia Press (Charlottesville, 1969), p. 183.

[17] The material from column one and three that is not bracketed is derived from Margaret Alterton, "An Additional Source for Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'," Modern Language Notes, #6, 1933, p. 355. The middle column is my own addition to her schema. I do not think it necessary to discuss the validity of the correlation made by Miss Alterton between columns one and three. Her argument is very convincingly stated in the above article. The rationale for my own inclusions of the bracketed tales can be found in Chapter II of this paper.

"The Pit and the Pendulum"	Bonaparte - unconscious symbolism	Sources
The opening scene (the judges-description of the prison)	Inquisitors = Father Prison = The womb	Llorente Material ("Solitary Confinement" "Inquisition") "Involuntary Experimentalist"
The pit	the vaginal opening to the world - to birth	Edgar Huntley
The pendulum	Father's Penis-(intra-uterine observation of coitus) Castrating Father in Excelsis	Llorente Material
the hideous pictures the prisoner sees on the walls of his dungeon	Primitive Representation of Father Figure	"The Man in the Bell"
The raving of the prisoner lying under the sweeping pendulum	Oscillation between Homosexuality and Heterosexuality	"The Man in the Bell" "Inquisition"
the decreasing dungeon	The womb contracting to force the embryo into the outside world	"The Iron Shroud" ("The Involuntary Experimentalist" - the red hot walls)
the closing scene	Caesarian operation Lasalle = good General Lafayette as opposed to John Allan	Llorente Material ("The Involuntary Experimentalist" - Salvation at last minute)

If the psycho-analytic interpretation is correct, then it has merely supported the general appearance of the womb-phantasy in Poe's era without illumination to the work of Poe. The only valid point of enquiry into the appearance of the symbols in Poe, is his selection and arrangement of them.

> But none of this explains why Poe should choose, of all possible anxiety themes, particularly these: nor above all, why these piled up horrors should make us shudder, when many a similar invention leaves us cold.[18]

Marie Bonaparte, basically misinterprets Poe's philosophies of composition. She does not comprehend the fact that Poe uses the motif of premature burial -- available to him through various sources, to consciously manipulate the emotions of the reader and cause the effect which he designs. The "similar invention" is in fact the same invention as the chart has shown. The major adaption which Poe made was in his use of the invention.

> To bring this about, these atrocities, for Poe, must have been[19] charged with the libido which wells up from the deepest unconscious sources and communicates conviction through works of art.[20] (Italics mine).

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[18] Marie Bonaparte, The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe, The Hogarth Press (London, 1971), p. 584.

[19] The three words "must have been" are in effect the rationale for Marie Bonaparte's probing of Poe's unconscious. She could not discover in Poe's aesthetic the reasons for the success of Poe's tales, so she sought to dig into the hidden well of Freudian symbols for the answer to her dilemma.

[20] Bonaparte, p. 584.

Poe is not "charged with the libido", he is charged with craft. He is a veritable Dupin in quest of a desired effect -- step by step he rationally creates terror (or whatever is desired) through the use of a motif readily available to him.

Bonaparte feels the terror, is unable to detect its source in Poe's method, and thus (already predisposed toward psycho-analysis), espouses the theory that it is deep within Poe's subconscious. But if any author was conscious of his own creative processes it was Poe. It is he, who so carefully describes to the reader his own creative method in his critical essays on composition. The next chapter will trace the motif of premature burial and the way it fits with Poe's aesthetic. The designing craft rather than the unconscious disturbances behind his work, will be outlined.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOTIF AND POE'S AESTHETIC

Poe improved upon his sources to the extent that he remains remembered, while his sources do not. The reason is simply that Poe's work is infinitely more crafted than that of his predecessors. Poe's aesthetic accounts for the difference and the key concept concerning the tale is "Effect."

Poe's theories of composition, although somewhat more elaborated concerning poetry, bridge both the poem and the tale, in regard to effect. Poe does state that the two mediums differ; beauty being the province of the poem, truth the aim of the tale.[1]

Truth as it is used in Poe is controversially defined. The complexity of argumentation does not allow its lengthy discussion here. I must, however, define the truth to which

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[1] The Tale -- "But truth is often, and in very great degree the aim of the tale."
The Poem -- "Now I designate Beauty as the Province of the Poem."
"The Poem only has collateral relations with the intellect."
I do not feel the need as does Joseph Garrison to argue a definitive conclusion to Poe's theories concerning the difference between the poem and the tale. Poe does not say that the only realm of the story is truth, nor does he say beauty is the only province of poetry. He merely states that the mediums are best represented when attaching themselves to these effects.

I frequently refer in this chapter.. Arthur Hobson Quinn[2] divides Poe's truth into Existence (actual life as we know it) and Essence (the realm of abstraction and imagination). Joseph Garrison[3] points out that the truth of Existence posits the truth of Essence. Truth is, therefore, twofold. The first truth rests on the level of existence -- in the real world; the second, lies at the level of the imagination with the soul. When I refer to truth, I mean a combination of both the truth of Existence and the truth of Essence. Poe's truth of Existence has only to conform to the real world as far as it is necessary (credibility) in order to evoke the far greater truth of Essence. Throughout this chapter, the necessity of Existence to posit Essence will be documented.

"The Philosophy of Composition" details Poe's a priori construction of "The Raven" according to the projected effect of its verses on the reader. Although the essay concerns the province of the poem, it is, nevertheless, the most detailed study of Poe's theory of effect. The method outlined in his construction of "The Raven" does extend to the realm of the tale. This becomes apparent in Poe's review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales.

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[2] Joseph Garrison, "The Function of Terror in the Work of Edgar Allan Poe", American Quarterly, 18 (1966), p. 142.

[3] Ibid.

> A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents -- he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect.[4]

Poe begins with the following "footnote" to his "Philosophy of Composition."

> Let us dismiss as irrelevant per se, the circumstance -- or say the necessity -- which in the first place gave rise to the intention of composing a tale that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.[5]

The absence of the impulse to create which is unexplained by Poe, must be kept in mind in any discussion of the construction of "The Raven." Poe's poem was composed as an attempt

> ... to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition; that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.[6]

Poe's first decision was as to the length of the poem. He kept in mind the need for a unity of impression and the necessity of an elevation of the soul; an elevation which he realized difficult to sustain. One hundred lines he thought

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[4] Edgar Allan Poe, The Works, eds. Stedman and Woodberry, The Colonial Company (New York, 1914), pp. 38-39. The applicability of Poe's poetical criticism to his criticism of the tale, is discussed thoroughly by Garrison in "The Function of Terror in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe."

[5] Ibid., p. 39.

[6] Ibid., p. 100.

the ideal. From length, he moved to the choice of impression to be conveyed. The work must be universally appreciable, and fulfill the elevating power of the poem, thus beauty would be its province. Poe next selected its proper tone -- melancholy. He thought a refrain would serve well as an "artistic piquancy," a key note to the poem. His description of how he would utilize the refrain, a convention already in use, has parallels with his improvement of the motif of premature burial.

> I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement, and soon saw it to be in a primitive condition ... I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, ... while I continually varied ... that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the refrain -- the refrain itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.[7]

Poe chose the nature of the refrain (a single word), its sound, the pretext for its continuous use (spoken by a raven), and the topic of the poem in which it was to be used (the death of a beautiful woman). The variation of the application of the refrain was considered, and the climax composed at the first touch of pen and paper. Poe next selected the locale for the scene (the scholar's chamber); the reality was verified, and the final additive -- "richness" or meaning was injected in the final lines of the last stanza. In his "Philosophy of Composition", and in the creation of "The Raven", Poe

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[7] Ibid., p. 44.

fulfilled his preference for the following method of writing:

> I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. I say to myself, in the first place, -- of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I on the present occasion, select?[8]

Poe utilized his theory of effect in concordance with the motif of premature burial to surpass those writers from whom he gleaned the motif. As Howard Jones says: "His originality consisted in doing better than anybody else what everybody else was trying to do."[9] I shall hypothesize another "Philosophy of Composition" (based on Poe's theories) to account for the effectiveness of "The Premature Burial." This method shall be significant, in its emphasis on Poe's craft, and by comparison, the absence of it in his sources.

The first consideration is that of extent. In his review of Hawthorne, Poe relates his concept of the ideal length of a short story.

> I allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself of course, of the immense force derivable from totality.[10]

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[8] Ibid., p. 37.

[9] Howard Jones, ed. American Prose Masters: Cooper, Hawthorne, Emerson, Poe, Lowell, Henry James (Mass., 1963) Intro.

[10] Works, p. 191.

"The Premature Burial" fits neatly in the category from one half to one hour; the force of its unity is not obstructed by undue length.

It is necessary to formulate a desired effect or impression. The province of the poem is beauty, but according to Poe, "Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale" (see footnote 1). The calculated effect, then, must be truth in the short story to be created.

Regarding truth as the province of the story, the tone of its highest manifestation becomes manditory. The ratiocinative tone is that which is the most legitimate in this respect.

The length, the province, and the tone determined, an "artistic piquancy" which serves as a key note in the construction of the tale should be determined. Thinking of the desired effect, the motif of premature burial becomes apparent. What better way to illustrate truth than through the conscious imminence of death? New effects would be produced through variation of the motif's "application" (see footnote 7).

The nature of the premature burial to be employed must be stipulated. The application should be susceptible to variation and ought to correlate to the desired effect. Various stories revolving around prematurial burial, documented and told as if fact, fulfill these requirements. Premature interment by mistake best documents the motif. The

sound of the motif is unimportant as Poe says:

> Music when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea, is simply music; the idea without the music, is prose, from its very definitiveness.[11]

A pretext for the continuous use of the motif of burial alive has to be found. This is once again given in the effect desired. The pretext must be to add credibility to the use of the motif. This is accomplished by a narrator relating in a ratiocinative tone various "true" (in terms of Existence) stories.

Considering all true topics, what is the most true? Death -- death is the only truth of which one is ultimately certain. When does death most aptly fit with the medium of the tale, when it is a premature death, one which is tempered with the universal fear of death. But Poe had to combine the fear with a narrator relating in a ratiocinative tone various incidents of premature burial. This can be accomplished by a general discussion of the motif varying closer and closer toward the narrator himself, eventually approaching the speaker's fear of burial alive directly. Perceiving the structure "forced" by the desired effects, the climax is determined, -- as the first written construction. This climax naturally arises from the narrator's realized fears of premature interment.

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[11] Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Poems and Stories, "Letter to B -," Alfred A. Knofp (New York, 1970), p. 861.

> The movement of the jaws, in the effort to cry aloud, showed me that they were bound up as is usual with the dead. I felt, too, that I lay upon some hard substance; and by something similar my sides were, also, closely compressed. So far, I had not ventured to stir any of my limbs -- but now I violently threw up my arms, which had been lying at length, with the wrists crossed. They struck a solid wooden substance, which extended above my person at an elevation of not more than six inches from my face. I could no longer doubt that I reposed within a coffin at last.[12]

After thus writing the climax, it is necessary to explain how the narrator comes to be interred. The locale of the climax has to be described. The bunk of a small sailing vessel has all the attributes of a coffin to someone who does not remember where he is. The night is tempestuous, providing the reason for the narrator sleeping in the ship; a gunning trip down river provides explanation for his being away from home.

Everything has so far been conceivable. The narrator on a gunning trip is caught in a storm and takes refuge in a small boat, sleeping in a tiny bunk. He awakens having a previously mentioned fear of premature burial and a slow return to consciousness from sleep, believing himself entombed. When he screams, he is aroused by several sailors, who acquaint him of his folly.

> But in subjects so handled, however skilfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye.[13]

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[12] Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems, Random House Inc. (New York, 1937), p. 267.

[13] Works, p. 54.

Suggestiveness and complexity remain to be inculcated into the tale. These relate to some undercurrent, however indefinite of meaning. The last two paragraphs fulfill the need for this "richness." The narrator tells how the fear of premature burial had precipitated his cataleptic disorder, how the tortures endured, had purged him of his melancholic concentrations. The meaning pervades the narrative preceding. The final equation of the motif as emblem of life's horrors is introduced in the last line of the last paragraph.

> Alas! The grim legion of sepulchre terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful -- but, like the demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us -- they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish.[14]

The preceding exercise in copying Poe's method in "The Philosophy of Composition" and applying it to "The Premature Burial", is to highlight Poe's use of effect in detailing his stories, particularly those containing premature burial. If we take Poe's methods and attempt to apply them to the various sources of "The Premature Burial", we can see immediately the numerous advantages of Poe's craft.

In his tale "Superstition," Sedley does not begin with the effect of truth, and construct his tale accordingly. His meaning is implanted without subtlety, a sign for Poe, of a work of mundanity and illegitimacy.

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[14] Poe, p. 268.

> It is the excess of the suggested meaning -- it is the rendering this the upper current of the theme -- which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists.[15]

"Superstition" renders its meaning in the "upper current" not only at the end of the story when it concludes --

> She was dead -- an awful lesson to those who surcharge youthful minds with imaginary horrors.[16]

but also at the commencement of the tale. Placing the moral at the head renders what follows mere propaganda; the whole of which appears contrived.

> For the love of humanity, let me digress a moment to entreat the attention of mothers and nurses to this point. I should almost rather behold the lovely innocent dead in reality, than to catch its young flesh made to crawl with these dreadful delusions, and see some detestable wretch -- some vile hireling nurse -- some wreckless, heartless mother, pouring the poison of superstition into its mind, and thus polluting and embittering the light current of hope and joy.[17]

Sedley is far too blatant -- "They are with propriety handled only when the severity and propriety of truth sanctify and sustain them.[18]

Seba Smith's poem, "The Life Preserving Coffin" is but a rhymed telling of the natural consequences of the article

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[15] Works, p. 55.

[16] The New-York Mirror, IX, p. 284.

[17] Ibid., p. 281.

[18] Poe, p. 258.

which it follows.

> They laid her in the coffin
> When the breath of life had fled,
> And a coit and satin pillow
> Was placed beneath her head; ...[19]

The effect is certainly not beauty, which according to Poe is the province of the poem, nor is it truth requisite to the tale. It is a game of rhyming in which the imagination contrives ("As inventions we should regard them with simple abhorrence")[20] an instance of premature interment. Poe, on the other hand, takes the precautions of the life-preserving coffin and uses them to highlight the fear of his narrator while he is preparing against mistaken entombment, and also during the climax as he discovers one by one his precautions absent.

"Doings of the Dead" from which Poe might also have drawn material, is lacking in effect as well. The couplet that heads the story is merely elaborated upon to find the narrator in a like position as Tom O'Shanter. The story is not particularly credible; the dream seems too much like a dream, and thus the final line, "I was but dreaming"[21] is no revelation. The whole vision does not compare to Poe's narrator's being buried alive. Poe's criticism expressed in "The Philosophy of Composition" comes to mind in regard to this

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[19] Columbian Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine, p. 36.

[20] Poe, p. 258.

[21] The Knickerbocker, p. 298.

tale.

> There is a radical error I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story, either history affords a thesis, or one is suggested by an incident of the day, or at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative, designing generally to fill in with description, dialogue, or authorial comment whatever crevices of fact or action may from page to page render themselves apparent.[22]

It is obvious from the preceding discussion, that Poe's "The Premature Burial" surpasses in craft its three reputed sources.

Poe used the motif of premature burial because he was most concerned with the depiction of truth, reflected not only with the motif, but generally throughout his tales.

> If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul, -- that I have deduced the terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results.[23]

Poe does not mean here that terror is not of Germany, but that terror is a universal; he uses it only from his <u>legitimate</u> sources. Legitimate here pertains to that which is true both in Existence and Essence; premature burial is one of Poe's "legitimate sources."

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[22] <u>Works</u>, p. 37.

[23] Preface to the First Edition of <u>Collected Tales</u>.

> We know of nothing so agonizing upon Earth -- we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost Hell." And thus all narrations upon this topic have an interest profound; an interest, nevertheless, which, through the sacred awe of the topic itself, very properly and very peculiarly depends upon the conviction of the truth of the matter narrated. What I have now to tell is of my actual knowledge -- of my own positive and personal experience.[24]

Margaret Alterton believes "fact greater than fiction" (Existence to posit Essence) in terms of effect, originates not with Poe, but with the philosophies espoused by Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine. Alterton notes the influences upon Poe's theories of the development of horror (effect).

> ... Yet evidence points to the probability that he followed not Hoffman but a severity of taste -- affirmed to be more strictly English; that he caught the idea from Blackwood writers, particularly from critics commenting on Medical Jurisprudence, that real horror arises from contemplating diseased conditions, both mental and physical. And even where he seems to go beyond the bounds of the rational, he is still treating horrible cases of pathological interest, nervous diseases, and insecurity.[25]

Poe admired many of the writers appearing in the magazine, speaking out against wrongly perpetrated criticism.

> And here it will be seen how full of prejudice are the usual animaderversions against those tales of effect, many fine examples of which were found in the earlier numbers of Blackwood's. The

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[24] Poe, p. 263.

[25] Margaret Alterton, The Origin of Poe's Critical Theory (Iowa, 1925), p. 16.

> impressions were wrought in a legitimate although sometimes an exaggerated interest.[26]

"Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician" is introduced by the editor of Blackwood's, with a preface that emphasizes, with a perverse pleasure, the means by which the reality of diseases and horrors "instruct" and "amuse" the public.

> And yet there are no members of society whose pursuits lead them to listen more frequently to what has been exquisitely termed the 'still sad music of humanity'. What instances of noble, though unostentatious heroism -- of calm and patient fortitude under the most intolerable anguish which can wring and torture these poor bodies of ours.[27]

Even more poignantly representative, is a passage from a tale entitled "le Revenant." The lines are extremely reminiscent of the first paragraph of "The Premature Burial." I believe Poe's words but a mirroring with slightly altered perspective, of the following:

> My greatest pleasure through life, has been the perusal of any extra-ordinary narratives of fact. An account of a shipwreck in which hundreds have perished; of a plague which has depopulated towns and cities; anecdotes and inquiries connected with the regulation of prisons, hospitals, or lunatic receptacals; nay, the very police reports of a common newspaper -- as relative to matters of reality; have always exerted a degree of interest

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[26] Works, "Review of Twice-Told Tales," p. 198.

[27] "Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician," p. 322.

> in my mind which cannot be produced by the best invented tale of fiction.[28]

In the paragraph introducing "A Scholar's Death Bed" (the first section of the Diary) the editors stress "additional" interest due to fact. "The following short but melancholy narrative, will, it is hoped, be perused with additional interest, when the reader is assured it is fact."[29] Poe reviewed "Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician" in Graham's Magazine, calling it "shamefully ill-written." But he also gave his opinion that Dr. Warren, in choosing bodily health as the basis for the series, had touched a topic which comes close to home as regards all humanity -- that had opened up a vein of human interest.

Poe's theory of effect was derived, then, at least in part from Blackwood's. Fact (or the semblance of it) rather than fiction, was stressed in the English magazine as it was

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28 Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, "Le Revenant," Vol. 21, 1827, p. 409. The story concerns the sensations of a man about to be hung and thus finds echoes in Poe's "Life and Death Tales." Poe might have read the story in light of his interest in the shadowy regions between life and death. It is also of interest to note a similar attitude expressed in "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym."

> "For the bright side of painting I had a limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown." (757)

29 "Passages From the Diary of a Late Physician," p. 477.

in Poe.

> Apart, however, from the inevitable conclusion, a priori that such cases must produce such effects ... we have the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience to prove that a vast number of such interments have actually taken place, I might refer at once, if necessary, to a hundred well-authenticated instances.[30]

Premature burial was a matter of fact in the 19th century. The aim of the tale is truth, and to this end all its component parts must strive.

> Poe seems to have used it (premature burial) as a foundation upon which to build a more extensive story, weaving around the horrors of the theme almost equally great attending horrors until the effect was one of overwhelming terror.[31]

Poe's philosophy toward the presentation of the credible, may be seen throughout his tales, especially those containing premature burial. This burial alive rests often at the core (as Alterton says above) to a series of incidents "within the limits of the accountable, of the real"[32] which produce together a desired effect.[33] I will briefly review a number of Poe's tales containing premature interment,

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[30] Poe, pp. 258-259.

[31] Alterton, p. 21.

[32] Works, "Philosophy of Composition," p. 51.

[33] It may not be apparent at this point where the burial alive appears in each tale. I will discuss this fully in the next chapter. Though they each contain the motif, the discussion here will focus on some aspect of Poe's attempt to sustain credibility.

emphasizing his stress on the plausible.

Before examining any individual story, I would like first to point out that the supposed division between Poe's ratiocinative tales and his tales of horror is not, for me, as clearly defined as some would have it. The narrators in almost all of Poe's tales of horror, are particularly rational. At times, such as in "The Pit and the Pendulum" or "The Fall of the House of Usher," this ratiocinative quality seems hyperbolic and even pathological. Under the circumstances, how can the prisoner be so logical in his attempt to evaluate his prison? How can the narrator in "The House of Usher" sit and calmly read the "Mad Triste" when the violence of the storm is so terrific? Even when the narrator may be supposed mad, a pathologically rational tone often remains, as in "The Black Cat."[34] This rationality shall be discussed further as we confront each tale.

> ... in 'Berenice' the horror of the cataleptic trance and premature burial are intensified and more fully developed by the peculiar disease to which the character Egaeus was a victim. This disease, a sort of monomania, which consists in a mad desire to stare at Berenice's teeth, and, after her trance and interment, to obtain them, adds a gruesomeness to the already gruesome and horrible theme. As can be seen, neither Blackwood nor Poe had depended in the least on the supernatural for the effect of horror from the life-in-death theme.[35]

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[34] This rational tone in its superb adherence to the logical, may possibly find its roots in Poe's knowledge of law methods convincingly outlined in the second chapter of Alterton's book.

[35] Alterton, p. 42.

Alterton is succinct in pointing out Poe's dependence on the natural (yet pathologic) rather than the supernatural for effect. We can go further in a similar evaluation of Poe's tale. Egaeus' fixation on Berenice's teeth[36] has been prefaced by an in depth description of his predisposition for fixation on various objects for long periods of time -- "to muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device ..."[37] The physical aspects which the narrator attributes to "Berenice's" frame, correlate to some form of consumption or wasting of the body. In this condition, the prominence of the teeth which remain unaffected is a requisite. As regards the fixation, therefore, the physical prominence of the teeth and the narrator's predisposition toward musing, lend credibility to the pre-eminence of the teeth in Egaeus' mind.

The premature burial itself is prefaced by a description of Berenice's tendency toward "trance." The narrator relates that he never loved Berenice, but that she became more of a fascination -- "as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation."[38] Their relationship, as well as the nature of her illness, lend plausibility to his

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[36] For a new source of this fixation, see Appendix, p. 134.

[37] Poe, p. 644.

[38] Ibid., p. 645.

monomaniacal removal of her teeth, and the burial alive.

Of final note is the rational narration of "Berenice." The diction is especially so -- almost scientific in its description. Egaeus examines his own actions with minute detail.

> In the one instance, the dreamer, or enthusiast, being interested by an object usually not frivolous, imperceptively loses sight of this object in the wilderness of deductions and suggestions issuing therefrom, until at the conclusion of a day-dream often replete with luxury, he finds the incitamentum, or just cause of his musings, entirely vanished or forgotten.[39]

"The Black Cat" presents a logical narrator (pathologically so), even though we presume him mad. The story is designed to make the reader believe it is being recounted without the slightest sensationalism. At the outset, the narrator states:

> My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events.[40]

Within the tale, the narrator reiterates his position further, amidst description of his return to his fire destroyed home. "But I am detailing a chain of facts -- and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect."[41]

The chain of circumstances is very credibly detailed.

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[39] Ibid., p. 644.

[40] Ibid., p. 223.

[41] Ibid., p. 225.

To each action, there is an explanation which seems natural; or if unnatural, there is still a mood setting rationale. The narrator describes the Black Cat, in regard to "an ancient popular notion which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise."[42] He mentions this only because it "happens" to be remembered, but it lends plausibility and mood to what ensues. Alcoholism is the legitimate reason behind his irritability, his change in disposition, and his final blinding of the cat. The effects of alcohol can be as devastating as those which effect the narrator. The motivation to hang the cat stems from a spirit of perverseness which one might think the whim of a madman. Not as Poe details -- "perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart."[43] It is thus a credible perverseness, "one of the indivisible primary faculties" which motivates the narrator's behavior.

The cat's impression etched against the wall after the fire, certainly assumes a supernatural aspect even at first for the narrator, whose "terror is extreme."[44] But a viable reason for the happening is given, complex in its affirmation of plausibility.

> The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd --

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42 Ibid., p. 223.

43 Ibid., p. 225.

44 Ibid.

> by someone of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with a view of arousing me from my sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly compressed plaster; the lime of which with the flames and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.[45]

Once the narrator has killed his wife, he must wall her up in order to conceal his crime. But how is he to do it so that it will remain unnoticed? We are told that the cellar is provided with a rough plaster that the dampness had prevented from hardening, and thus the imperceptible means by which to wall up the body, in the similitude of the new and old plaster.

Poe's craft in affecting a semblance of reality, is often concealed, but is always present in the internal consistency of events. After the walling up of the woman, the cat cannot be located. The narrator makes mention of its "glorious" absence. Indeed, a whole paragraph is devoted to its disappearance. When we reach the final lines, there is no question as to when or how the cat was walled up alive. Our mind reverts back to its disappearance immediately after the burial of the corpse in the wall. We connect the two events and realize the narrator's natural error at the scene of the crime.

Poe sets "The Pit and the Pendulum" at the time of

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[45] Ibid., p. 226.

the Spanish Inquisition. The consignment to a dungeon and the horrible torture experienced by the narrator are thus made credible.

> Of the dungeons there had been strange things narrated -- fables I have always deered them; but yet strange, and too ghastly to repeat, save in a whisper.[46]

The above is recounted towards the beginning of the tale; the struggles of the many who preceded the narrator as victims of the Inquisition are described as "strange" "fables." But when the pit looms out of the blackness, the narrator narrowly missing its horrifying emptiness, Poe subtly refers back to the "strange things" that had been heard. This places the narrator's struggle even further in the context of the Inquisition -- for the victim in Poe's tale becomes a part of the fables which represent the common plight of the Inquisitional victim.

> And the death just avoided was of that very character which I regarded as fabulous and frivolous in the respecting of the inquisition.[47]

An accidental fall at the edge of the pit is occasioned not by happenstance, but by the narrator's earlier shredding of his garment in order to ascertain the size of his crypt. When the narrator falls asleep rapidly after his escape from doom, it is attributed to "drugged" water. This is more reasonable than mere fatigue. The final salvation at

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[46] Ibid., p. 249.

[47] Ibid., p. 250.

the end of the story, though spectacular, is still entirely plausible. These characteristics of Poe's narrative are representative of the tale as a whole, and inspire the story with "additional interest" (see footnote 28) for the reader.

Of Poe's tales, "The Pit and the Pendulum" utilizes one of the most rational approaches of narration. Throughout his confinement, the prisoner evinces a logical effort to deduce his way out of confinement. In this respect he is akin to a Dupin.

> I brought to mind the inquisitional proceedings, and attempted from that point to deduce my real condition. The sentence had passed; and it appeared to me that a very long interval of time had since elapsed. Yet not for a moment did I suppose myself actually dead ... but where and in what state was I?[48]

The narrator is consciencious in regard to everything, attempting to render all problems answerable. "But my soul took a wild interest in trifles."[49] The desire on the part of the narrator for example, to correct any errors in his computations ("vain indeed")[50] lends weight to his reliability as teller of the tale. From the attempt to ascertain the size of the vault, to his ingeneous escape through the aid of the ravenous rats, the narrator manifests a conspicuous rationality which pervades the whole of "The Pit and the Pendulum."

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[48] Ibid., p. 248.

[49] Ibid., p. 251.

[50] Ibid.

In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the style of the narration produces a true-to-life portrayal of madness. Although in the opening paragraph the narrator says he will relate the story "calmly", this is precisely what he does not do. Throughout the tale, one senses desperation in the man's voice. With the first sentence this becomes apparent.

> True! -- nervous -- very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?[51]

Poe utilizes the repetition of words and phrases, the many dashes and exclamations,[52] to emphasize the man's nervousness and insecurity. His monomaniacal fixation on the old man's eye, the whole scene revolving about the murder, ironically affirm the narrator's insanity in spite of his own exclamations to the contrary! "If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer."[53] The denouement finally and irrevocably inflicts the narrator's inability to cease phantasizing.

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[51] Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," p. 203.

[52] Poe uses the same style (syntax) to point out Roderick's madness at the end of "The House of Usher."

> I heard them -- many, many days ago -- yet I dared not -- I dared not speak! And now -- tonight -- Ethelred -- ha! ha! -- the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield, -- say rather, the rending of her coffin ... (245)

[53] Poe, p. 305.

> They heard! -- they suspected! -- they knew ... I felt that I must scream or die! -- and now -- again! -- hark! louder! louder! louder! louder -- ...[54]

The premature burial and return of Madelaine in "The Fall of the House of Usher," is explicable in natural terms. The disease of which she had been a victim had been "partially catalyptical"[55] in nature. She was not interred in the family burial ground but was put in one of the vaults within the main walls of the building because of the "unusual character of the malady of the deceased."[56] When Roderick and the narrator looked upon Madelaine in her coffin they noted "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip."[57] After her interment the narrator heard "certain low and indefinite sounds ..."[58] obviously due to Madelaine's revivification. He then heard "a cracking a ripping sound"[59] the entombed escaping her confines. The grating of her vault door is heard amidst the raging of the storm. Her struggles

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[54] Ibid., p. 306.

[55] Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," p. 236.

[56] Ibid., p. 240.

[57] Ibid., p. 241.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., p. 243.

"within the coppered archway of the vault"[60] reach the two men, until finally, the wind opens the door to the salon, and Madelaine falls in upon Roderick. All of the events detailed preclude any supernatural aspect to the return of the prematurely buried Madelaine.

The handling of the motif in this credible fashion is representative of the story in general. All the scenes possess an uncanny plausibility leading to a heightened effect. Even in the destruction of the mansion, the violent "tempestuous" storm combined with the slight fissure in the edifice (mentioned in the beginning of the tale), account for the final sinking of the house in the tarn.

> The 'Red Death' had long devastated the country. 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. 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. And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour.[61]

"The Mask of the Red Death" gains its effect from the plague which has, throughout mankind's history, killed millions of helpless victims. Poe himself in "King Pest" describes London to us at the time (1664-1666) the disease was scouring the city.

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[60] Ibid., p. 245.

[61] Ibid., p. 269.

> The city was in a great measure depopulated -- and in those horrible regions, in the vicinity of the Thames, where, amid the dark, narrow, and filthy lanes and alleys, the Demon of Disease was supposed to have had his nativity, awe, terror and superstition were alone to be found stalking abroad.[62]

Poe's tale plays upon the fears of a very real contagion, represented in the ultimate folly of Prospero's attempt to seal the disease outside the walls of his castle. The plague, like premature burial, has a basis in reality, and thus is more effective in its ability to effect the reader with its truth.

As Poe drew on the motif of premature burial because of its association with fact, so, too, did he fashion the rest of his stories with the same plausibility. As we have noted, his methods were diversified -- from the rational narration of "The Pit and the Pendulum" to the rationalizing narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart." Throughout, a calculated and credible truth of Existence accomplishes the overall truth of Essence in Poe's narrative. In the next chapter, I will examine all the tales in which the motif of premature burial occurs. I will interpret these from the perspective of the motif, keeping in mind its background.

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[62] Poe, "King Pest," p. 721. For further information and a possible source concerning this plague, see Appendix, p. 136.

CHAPTER V

THE MOTIF AND ITS APPEARANCE IN POE'S TALES

This chapter discusses the motif of premature burial as it effects the tales in which it appears. The classifications used in Chapter I to structure the general motif are once again the organizer here. To this end, the interpretations not only partake of the intrinsic nature of the tale, but also where applicable of the background motif. In the latter instance, novel perspectives by which to approach the tales are introduced.

There have been numerous critical essays written concerning "The Fall of the House of Usher." I wish to posit a new interpretation; the basis for its novelty is to be found in the perspective from which the story is analyzed. My view, taken from the background of the motif of premature burial, places Poe's tale under two classifications discussed in Chapter I, mistake or intention, and the foundation sacrifice.

The central question from the vantage point of the motif, is whether or not Roderick Usher knew[1] he was placing

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[1] Thomas Mabbott in Notes and Queries, Vol. 198., pp. 542-543, says Roderick knew his sister was alive because they were identical twins, -- if she was breathing, he would have known it. He does not, however, give the reason why Roderick buries his sister alive.

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his sister in the vault alive. Did he believe her dead, or was he fully aware of the cataleptic semblance of death? If the latter is true, then to what purpose would his actions be devoted? My thesis is that Roderick intentionally placed Madelaine in the crypt alive as a form of foundation sacrifice.

> The disease of the lady Madelaine had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent, although transient affections of a partially catalentical character were the universal diagnosis.[2] (236)

Roderick's sister suffers from a disease of a cataleptical nature. The evening the narrator arrives at the house, Madelaine is seen passing through "a remote portion of the apartment." (236) That same evening, we learn from Roderick that Madelaine "had succumbed to the prostrating power of the destroyer" (236) and would be seen living by him no more. "For several days" (236) following, Roderick does not mention his sister -- he reads and paints with the narrator or plays "wild fantasies" (237) on his guitar. Roderick is, as the narrator notes, fully conscious of the "tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne." (237)

One evening Roderick informs the narrator "abruptly" (240) that the lady Madelaine is "no more". (240) He wishes to place the corpse in one of the vaults of the house.

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[2] Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York, 1938). All subsequent references to the tales in this chapter will be noted by parentheses and page number.

Roderick explains this odd wish as due to the nature of Madelaine's disease, the inquiring medical men, and the remoteness of the family burial spot. The narrator agrees saying:

> I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded at best as harmless. (240)

Roderick and the narrator place the body in its coffin and carry it down to a vault "small, damp, and entirely without means of light", the door of which is of "immense weight." (240) The disease affected Madelaine in the "maturity" of her youth, and "had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip ..." (241)

Following the burial, a change comes over Roderick. He "roamed" (241) about the house restless and uneasy. The narrator describes: "there were times indeed when I thought his increasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret" (241) and recounts how Roderick gazed for long periods of time at nothing -- "as if listening to some imaginary sound". (241) The last of the Usher clan becomes more and more agitated infecting the narrator with his nervousness. One tempestuous evening, they read together "The Mad Trist" amidst which various strange noises are heard. At the climax of the "Trist" the eerie sounds become no longer

ignorable. Roderick says:

> Now hear it? -- yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long-long-long -- many minutes, many hours, have I heard it ... I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! ... I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them -- many, many days ago -- yet I dared not -- I dared not speak!" (245)

Madelaine, blood stained and living enters the apartment falling on Roderick dragging him to the ground a corpse. The narrator flees "aghast" (245) while the House of Usher splits and crumbles silently into the tarn.

I wish to examine the facts as given in the tale, and indict Roderick of intentionally burying his sister alive. Madelaine suffers from a disease of a cataleptical nature and it is therefore obvious that her brother should take the necessary precautions to assure her death. The Encyclopaedia Americana comes to mind here: "Great care should be taken not to bury the body too soon after death."[3] The only precaution Roderick takes is placing his sister in the house vault as opposed to the family burial ground. Yet this proves no better than a burial in the earth, for she is "screwed" (241) in her coffin, placed in a black dungeon, and her means of egress "secured" (241) by an immensely heavy door.

We cannot ascertain the moment of Madelaine's death. The evening the narrator arrives, she is traipsing about the house, but once seen by the narrator, she mysteriously is

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[3] Encyclopaedia Americana, p. 332.

never to be viewed again. She succumbs, and yet we do not presume her dead, for her actual death is mentioned several days later. We surmise that she is bedridden. But why then does Roderick not introduce his "boon" (232) companion with whom he experiences a close intimacy to his ailing sister? It is strange that Roderick fails to mention his "beloved" twin for several days after she is confined to bed. Not only does he not speak of her, but he paints and reads when one would expect him at the bedside of his twin ("sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature ... existed between them.") (240)

The "sinister countenance" (240) of the physician is the narrator's curious rationalization for complying with Roderick's desire to place his sister in the house vault. Why does Poe emphasize the dark nature of the doctor? On his way to see Roderick at the commencement of the tale, the narrator meets the family physician -- "His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning ..." (233) Poe points through "cunning" to the nefarious nature of the medical service which Madelaine is receiving. Indeed, the reader is led to believe that the physician, (with Roderick's knowledge), is doing Madelaine evil, is in fact the <u>cause</u> of her malady. This explains why Madelaine becomes bedridden <u>immediately</u> after the narrator arrives. It was feared that the ill-treatment of Madelaine would be detected, she was thus kept from the narrator's sight.

The physical appearance of the corpse in the coffin

provides further evidence of Roderick's complicity in her premature burial. The lingering smile and blush upon the bosom of his sister should have precipitated a postponement of the interment. After the crime is committed, the alteration in Roderick is clearly a result of a disturbed conscience -- his listlessness and ghastly pallor provide evidence of his guilt. The secret with which he is burdened is his evil act, and the sounds for which he is listening are the signs of Madelaine's revivification in the coffin. His distraction throughout the reading of "The Mad Trist" is due to his knowledge of what is occurring in the vault. His final position, climaxes this distraction which represents the end of the "tottering" of his reason -- the pendulum had swung to madness.

> His head had dropped upon his breast -- yet I knew that he was not asleep ... he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway. (344)

Roderick's final speech provides a confession. He had heard the noises in the vault for many days; he harkened to Madelaine's "first feeble movements" (245) but did not rescue his sister from the "most hideous of fates." (248) He knew precisely what the final noises represented --

> the rending of her coffin and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault. (245)

His conscience renders clear the beating of her heart as she comes to wreck a divine vengeance upon her would-be murderer.

Given Roderick's guilt, we must discover why he committed the crime. In the background to the motif of premature

burial, it was stated that foundation sacrifices were often carried out to protect a building and sustain it from destruction. It is Roderick's desire to protect the House of Usher -- "an appellation which seemed to include ... both the family and the family mansion" (233) from imminent destruction.

There is a stressed correspondence throughout the tale between the Ushers and their mansion. The narrator speculates "upon the possible influence which the one in the long lapse of centuries might have exercised upon the other ..." (232) The house is decrepit and decayed. The Ushers, Roderick and Madelaine, are both weak and frail. They remind us of Hepzibah's chickens in Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables; bred amongst themselves until all their vitality is cultured from them. Roderick suffers from a "constitutional family evil and one for which he despaired to find a remedy" (235 Italics mine), an evil perpetrated by the sentience of his mansion and the tarn surrounding it. "The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the collocation of these stones -- in the order of their arrangement." (239 Italics mine) Usher "tottering" (if not already insane) on the verge of insanity, believes that his race is doomed, that the house is in part responsible, but is itself doomed as part and parcel of his own race. The narrator discusses Usher's mental

"fixation"[4] on the house which to his mind is a sentient tormentor.

> I learned ... another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence ... an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion had, ... obtained over his spirit -- an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets ... -- brought about the morale of his existence. (235)

Roderick believes his race doomed to extinction and expresses "bitterness" (236) about it. His sister's death which is imminent, "would leave him ("him the hopeless and the frail") the last of the ancient race of Ushers." (236) He is definitely, if not mad, very close to that state.[5] He expresses a monomanical fixation upon the house, the tarn, and its sentience. Roderick does not wish to be destroyed, and so offers the sacrifice of his sister to the House of Usher, so that it, and in turn the family in the person of himself, may live on. When Madelaine escapes the vault, the house deprived of its victim, collapses sinking with the last remnants of the Usher clan into the tarn.

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[4] Usher's fixation is indeed a pathological one with its echoes in Poe's other tales. It can be likened to Egaeus' preoccupation with Berenice's teeth, or the hatred the narrator manifests in "The Tell-Tale Heart" for the old man's eye.

[5] The "Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;"
in the poem "The Haunted Palace," are illustrative of the madness which "haunted" Roderick's imagination.

"Berenice" also represents the motif of premature burial under the classification of mistake or intention. When the tale is examined from the perspective of the motif, the obvious and central question becomes that examined in "The Fall of the House of Usher". Does Egaeus mistake Berenice's condition for death, or is he aware that she is in a cataleptic trance? I posit that the narrator inters his fiancee intentionally in order to possess her teeth, which in his demented mind, become synonymous with a happiness he is unable to attain.

The tale begins "Misery is manifold." (642) Egaeus as he is represented throughout the story is "addicted to the most intense and painful meditation". (643) He evinces this attitude immediately, talking of "wretchedness," "unloveliness," "sorrow," "evil," "agonies," and "anguish" in the first paragraph. His childhood and upbringing have been controlled by his "time-honored," "gloomy," "gray hereditary halls" (642) (reminiscent of Roderick Usher and the effect of the family mansion upon him).

In his past, even before birth, he believes he has

> a remembrance of aerial forms -- of spiritual and meaning eyes -- of sounds, musical yet sad; a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow -- vague variable indefinite, unsteady, and like a shadow, too, in the impossibility of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist. (642)

As he grows up -- he grows "ill of health and buried in gloom." (643) The real world affects Egaeus as a vision, and his

visions as the real world.

When he reaches manhood, Egaeus' "disease" (643) assumed a "monomaniac character". "This monomania ... consisted in a morbid irritability of those properties of mind termed the attentive". (643) The narrator muses for long hours on frivolous objects. He can spend a whole day looking at the way a shadow falls on the floor. "But his meditations were never pleasurable" (644) and true to his upbringing, the lingering of his past, he can never escape the shadow of gloom.

Berenice is the narrator's cousin, but his exact counterpart in character. She grows up as he did in the same atmosphere and yet ("yet differently we grew") (643) she is "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy". (643) In spite of the gloomy halls of her ancestors, she roams "carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows ... or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours". (643) She is, in spite of Egaeus' "gray ruins of memory" (643) a "sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim! ... a Maid among its fountains!" (643) Her early days are those of "light heartedness" and a "gorgeous yet fantastic beauty!" (643)

A mysterious disease overtakes the happy and beautiful Berenice. She alters in every way. "The destroyer came and went ... and the victim ... I knew her not". (643) She is plagued with the inexplicable type of consumption which attacks so many of Poe's heroines.

> Among the numerous train of maladies superinduced by that fatal and primary one which effected a revolution of so horrible a kind in the moral and physical being of my cousin ... a species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in <u>trance</u> itself -- trance itself resembling positive dissolution, and from which her manner of recovery was, in most instances, startlingly abrupt. (643)

The physical alteration is tremendous, and the only part of the body remaining unaffected, is her teeth which assume a prominence because of the emaciation of her frame.

The monomaniacal character of the narrator's disease reaches its apex in his fixation upon the teeth of Berenice. He looked at her lips one evening -- "They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, the <u>teeth</u> of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves to my view". (646) From that point on, in the "disordered chamber of my brain" (646) he cannot rid himself of the "white and ghastly <u>spectrum</u> of the teeth. Not a speck on their surface -- not a shade on their enamel ... but what the brief period of her smile had sufficed to brand in my memory". (646) Egaeus longs for the teeth with a "frenzied desire". (646) All he can think about are the teeth, feeling them, touching them, possessing them; they become "the essence" of his mental life. They take on a "sentient power"[6] -- "a capability of moral expression." They become ideas ("que tous ses dents etaient des idees")

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[6] The teeth take on a sentient power -- like the House does for Roderick. The use of the word here strengthens the parallel. See footnote 4.

(647); Egaeus coveted them "madly". (647).

One evening the narrator learned that Berenice

> was no more! She was seized with epilepsy in the early morning, and now, at the closing in of night, the grave was ready for its tenant, and all the preparations for the burial were completed". (647)

There is a gap in the narrative, and we see Egaeus sitting in his library, confused as to what has happened. True to his inability to distinguish between dream and reality, he cannot remember what has transpired -- but feels it as something horrible. A servant enters telling of the violation of Berenice's grave, of her being alive but disfigured. Egaeus notices his person, it is sullied with earth, and there is a shovel nearby. He knocks a little box off his desk and out fall the teeth of "Berenice" -- "ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor". (648)

Throughout the story Poe intimates Egaeus' growing lack of mental balance. It first vaguely appears in his belief that he had a "past existence" before birth. The transformation of dream to reality, and reality to dream further posits an inability to relate to the real world. Egaeus himself calls his monomaniacal fixations a "disease." He talks of his reason -- "shaken from its balance only by trivial things". (645) In his visions of Berenice in particular, we see the dissolution of his ability to pinpoint his own real experience.

> Was it my own excited imagination -- or the misty influence of the atmosphere -- or the uncertain

> twilight of the chamber -- or the gray draperies which fell around her figure -- that caused in it so vacillating and indistinct an outline? I could not tell. (646)

He longs for Berenice's teeth with a "frenzied" desire. He covets them "madly". He cannot rid himself of the "spectrum" in the "disordered chamber" of his mind. When he finally rips the teeth from Berenice's mouth, he cannot even remember the deed -- in his "mad" desires he has lost all sanity.

What causes Egaeus' insanity? It is the perpetual life of gloom of which he despairs. He himself says: "like a shadow- vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady, and like a shadow, too, in the impossibility of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist". (642 Italics mine) He wants desperately to get out from the shadow of pain, and expresses a mad desire to do so.

> Either the memory of past bliss is the anguish of today, or the agonies which are, have their origin in the ecstasies which might have been. (642).

Egaeus despairs for what might have been. In his "frenzied" state, Berenice represents happiness, carelessness and light-heartedness. In her, when he was growing up, he saw what he desired, but what was not possible for him.

Berenice's teeth, -- which do not decay (even with her disease), represent for Egaeus all this happiness. "Des idees" -- the very idea of happiness. It is her teeth, which, all white and flawless, "not a speck", "not a shade", stand for the light-heartedness that is the escape from the melancholia from which he suffers. It is "a smile of peculiar

meaning" (Italics mine) which Egaeus focuses on; "that brief period of her smile" (Italics mine) that is the unattainable joy incarnate.

Egaeus "never loved" Berenice. His feelings "had never been of the heart" (645) but "always were of the mind". (645) He sees her as an object of analysis -- "not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation". (645) She loves him nevertheless. "In an evil moment" he asked Berenice to marry him.

Conveniently, when the "nuptials are approaching" Egaeus begins his fixation on Berenice's teeth. The "phantasm" holds its "ascendency" until her death. Berenice dies seized with epilepsy. The nature of her disease is described as often having the semblance of death. Egaeus does not make sure (as it would have been blatantly necessary) that she is indeed dead. She is buried the very same day that she supposedly dies.

It becomes obvious that Egaeus, not wanting to marry Berenice, insanely desiring her teeth (and happiness), allows her to be interred alive. That which follows Egaeus' removal of the teeth and his amnesia, provide even more weight to his general insanity and the uncontrollable frenzy represented in his mad wish for the ability to himself smile.

In "The Black Cat" an animal is buried alive. I have noted in the first chapter that animals were often buried along with their dead masters. Protection against evil

spirits was the proclaimed motive for this practice; more generally, the animals were meant to serve the deceased. In Poe's tale, the black cat serves the murder victim by revenging her death.

In the context of the classification of mistake or intention, the chain of events posit an intended burial in the wall. The cat controls the events which lead up to the discovery of the crime by the police, in the same way as it forecasts the narrator's inevitable doom at the represented gallows etched on its chest.

> There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man. (223)

At the outset, by detailing the devotion of a pet to its master and by describing its friendship as superior in comparison to "mere Man", Poe has set the scene for the cat's intentional (presupposing a high intelligence) burial and its loyalty in revenge. The narration intimates the cat is more than brute beast -- "the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise". (223)

The narrator possesses a large cat named Pluto. Pets have always been a favorite of both he and his wife. An alteration comes over the narrator when he begins drinking heavily. He treats the pets badly, and one night, in a drunken frenzy, gouges out one of Pluto's eyes with a penknife. The animal naturally avoids him after the incident.

The drinking continues to increase until in a spirit of perverseness, Pluto is hung from a tree in the garden by the inebriated narrator.

A mysterious fire ravages the narrator's house and all his possessions. In the ruins a "bas-relief" of Pluto's outline with a noose about its neck is found on the only wall left standing. A complex explanation is given for the effect, but the narrator "cannot rid" himself "of the phantasm of the cat" -- he cannot entirely believe his own rational explanation.

In a tavern one evening, the narrator sees another cat which closely resembles the one he had hanged. It oddly belongs to no one.

> It was a black cat -- a very large one -- fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. But this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast. (226)

The narrator befriends the animal and it follows him home. The following day, the narrator realizes the cat has but one eye -- just as did Pluto. It is indeed strange and significant of the forces controlling him, that the narrator does not notice the same type of disfiguration which had presented a "frightful appearance" (224) in Pluto.

> What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast was the discovery on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes ... (227)

The scenes that follow solidify an intention as regards

the movements of the cat. The beast follows the narrator around with a "pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend". (227) It seems to know how much the narrator despises it and yet it torments him with its "loathsome caresses". If the narrator arose to walk, it would get in between his feet and "thus nearly throw" (227 him down. In the meantime, --

> The sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one destroyed had altered. The white spot had become the image of a hideous -- of a ghastly thing -- of the Gallows! -- oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime -- of Agony and of Death! (227)

The narrator is no longer able to sleep. The cat haunts him perpetually.

> I started from dreams of unutterable fear to find the hot breath of <u>the thing</u> upon my face, and its vast weight -- an incarnate nightmare ... (228)

The cat is again compared to man. There is something extra-bestial about it -- is it perhaps a witch? How can it be so intentionally in control? The answers are not given, but its power is described.

> And <u>a brute beast</u> -- whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed -- <u>a brute beast</u> to work out for <u>me</u> -- for me, a man fashioned in the image of the High God -- so much of insufferable woe!

The cat intentionally "works out" the narrator's woe, as it works out the events leading up to its own burial alive.

On the day of the murder, the narrator goes with his wife into the cellar. The cat gets caught in his legs and the man almost tumbles the length of the stairs. In a

frenzied state the narrator attempts to kill the cat, but the wife protects it becoming herself the victim. She is walled up in the cellar and remains thus buried until a party of police are harkened to the spot by a noise from within the tomb.

> ... by a cry, at first muffled and broken, ... utterly anomalous and inhuman -- a howl -- a wailing shriek, half of horror, and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation. (230)

The cat's informing voice "half of horror and half of triumph" consigns the narrator "to the hangman" -- to the gallows prophetically displayed on the beast's chest.

The introductory superstition of the cat's being a witch becomes the overriding principle in the tale (for lack of a better explanation). It is the cat's desire to destroy the narrator. The fire, the return in the form of another cat, the gallows on the breast, its provocation of the narrator, and the final scream within the tomb signal the cat's conscious intent. The death of the narrator's wife, the live burial of the cat with her, and the cat's revenge of her murder in fulfillment of the sacrifice of animals with their masters as protection, seems incidental to the primary motive of destroying the narrator. Nevertheless, one cannot be entirely certain, for as James Hastings says: "Many weird tales are told of the manner in which it (the animal) performs its tutelary function".[7]

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[7] Hastings, p. 115.

In "The Mask of the Red Death" Poe illustrates, by means of an ineffectual premature burial, man's illusory attempt to escape the phantasm fear and its inevitable causes in death and contagion. His tale is as wonderfully illusive in tone and style as is his subject. Man's struggle to escape the inevitable is depicted as the height of folly. Keeping in mind the motif of premature burial, and focusing on man's fear of death, we can relate the tale to its disillusioning conclusions.

Prince Prospero's fear of infection, and his absurdity in attempting to shut it without the walls of his castle, precipitates his "premature interment" within the confines of his abode.

> The wall had gates of iron. The courtiers having entered, brought furnaces and many hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. (269)

His thousand friends and "security were within-without was the Red Death". (269) The world of the palace becomes separated from the universe outside. But the fear of the world without the walls ("The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out ... from the sympathy of his fellow-men" (267) does not.

The story details a fear of which "tone and movement are all";[8] "merely the most perfect description of that

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[8] Davidson, p. 154.

fantastic decor which he had again and again imagined".[9] The landscape is "bizarre", as are man's conceptualized irrational fears of death and its harbingers. The nature of the masquerade and the seven eerie apartments, the ebony clock which reverberates through the crowd of "revellers" "stiff freezing as they stand", and the general dream quality of the whole complement the attempt to examine fear -- the intangible.

> ... The crowd ... aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before ... there rose at length from the company a buzz, a murmur, expressive of disapprobation and surprise -- then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust. (272)

The "mummer" who assumes the guise of the "Red Death" and enters the party, inspires a fear of the disease-ridden reality which beats without the palace. Although the "phantasms" of the masquerade are plentiful, his assumed appearance, incarnates the "dreams" which "stalked" (271) to and fro in the chambers.

> But from a certain nameless awe with which the mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there were found none who put forth a hand to seize him so that ... while the vast assembly by one impulse, shrank from the centres of the rooms to the walls ... (273)

The prisoners of the palace, for they are consciously such once the masque and fear become introduced, are, in the presence of the figure who "was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habilements of the grave", filled with "a deadly terror" (273) No one dared approach the intruder as he

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[9] Joseph Krutch, Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius, (New York, 1926), p. 77.

passed from one room to the next. The Prince, outraged, chases the image attempting to kill it but instead is himself destroyed. A crowd of the spectators wildly attack the masked figure.

> Then summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revellers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless, within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpse-like mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness untenanted by any tangible form. (273)

The figure turns out to be but an illusion. It is the masque of the Red Death -- representative of the fear of death.

> The intruder is ... then not the plague, not death itself, but man's creation, his self-aroused and self-developed fear of his own mistaken concept of death.[10]

Prince Prospero, representative of mankind, is entombed in the world of the palace, by his irrational attempt to escape death. His supposed isolation is a material illusion, the confines of his prison become immaterial in regard to the imminence of an ultimate death that transcends all boundaries. Death is "a ruling principle of the universe"[11] and thus inescapable. In the end, the prisoner succumbs to the phantasm of fear -- a mask of death, affirming the hopeless unreality of reality for man, concerning even his ruling

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[10] Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Meaning and The Masque of the Red Death", in Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Regan (New Jersey, 1967), p. 142.

[11] Ibid., p. 139.

principle.

The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is subject to various irrational fears, the most central of which is a fear of death. It is this fear which provokes the narrator to murder, and to believe he has prematurely interred his victim. The style of the narration (discussed in Chapter IV) heightens an impression of the frenzied aspect of this dread of death. The "disease" (303) of which the narrator is victim, although peculiarly heightened by his "nervousness", is seen in the historical background as one of the major causes for the frequent appearance of the motif of premature burial.

The narrator does not wish to kill the old man; it is his eye which he despises. It "haunted" him day and night. What does the narrator see in the "Evil Eye" that sparks his mad disposition to murder? What does that eye symbolize in Poe?

> I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture -- a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees -- very gradually -- I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (305)

It is a "vulture eye". (303) Poe refers to the vulture in his "Sonnet to Science". It has "peering eyes" which prey upon the poet's "heart" as daughters of "old time". Poe's most significant reference occurs in his poem "Romance" where he writes of the Condor -- (the American Vulture).

> Of late, eternal Condor years
> So shake the very heaven on high
> With tumult as they thunder by ... (1013)

The eye of the old man represents time, which in the narrator's tortured imagination, relates to his own inevitable death. Such a death signalled by time is frequently seen in Poe.[12]

> And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. (273)

Time inevitably reminds each person of the imminence of death. The narrator believes that destroying the eye (and thus his consciousness of time) will end his horrible visions of an impending death. He seeks to flee the terror of the many things "he hears in hell". (303) Ironically, the hopelessness of any commutations for the narrator, is reiterated in the futility of the old man's hopes at escaping the same shadow of death.

The narrator's fears of death are most poignantly brought to light on the evening of the murder. An empathy existing between murderer and victim highlights his terror. The narrator senses the old man is sitting up in bed listening "just as" he "had done night after night harkening to

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[12] The figure of time appears in "The Pit and the Pendulum" representing a horrible death for the narrator: It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum, such as we see on antique clocks. (252)

the death watches in the wall". (304)[13] A "groan of mortal terror" (304) stemming from the victim, is well known to his murderer.

> I knew the sound well. Many a night just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that disturbed me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt and pitied him ... but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. (304)

Fears of death and horrifying visions inspire the madness which possesses the narrator. "I have told you that I am very nervous: so I am". (305) In his nerve-wrecked state, the murderer has fixed on the old man's eye as representative of a death which stalks him -- of time which inevitably will have its victim.

The narrator commits the crime amidst the beating of a heart, -- his own. "The old man's terror must have been extreme". (305) The empathy between murderer and victim remains till the last. The horror the old man feels is echoed in the murder's pounding breast. Death arrives only after the cessation of the beating.

When the police arrive, the narrator is at ease. "His manner had convinced them". (306) But soon, he becomes once again prey to his irrational fears. Death looms before

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[13] These "death watches" remind us of the "figures" (256) that appear on the walls of the dungeon in "The Pit and the Pendulum."

him, the death that discovery will mean. His own heart beats hard out of fear, his head "ached" and he fancies a "ringing" in his ears. The heart beats "louder! louder! louder! --" The terror of death, so much a part of his being, causes him to believe the sound stems from the body -- prematurely buried. But it is impossible -- rationally, for the corpse has been disected. The narrator confesses, ironically announcing a failure to "comfort himself" (304) ("for what had I now to fear" (305) "I smiled -- for what had I to fear"), (306) affirming finally that "All in vain" (304) -- "Death ... had stalked with his black shadow before him". (304)

In "The Premature Burial", Poe is once again true to the traditions of the motif depicting fear as the cause of a (supposed) premature burial. The narrator fears premature interment not as opposed to death, but as a more focused and terrible form of that fate. The discussion to follow shall be brief as much of the tale has been discussed in preceding chapters.

> I was lost in reveries of death, and the idea of premature burial held continual possession of my brain. The ghastly Danger to which I was subjected haunted me day and night ... And when, finally, I sank into slumber, it was only to rush at once into a world of phantasms, above which, with vast, sable, overshadowing wings, hovered, predominant, the one sepulchral Idea. (264)

The narrator is subject to fits of catalepsy and focuses on the idea of being prematurely buried. His dreams become nightmares dealing with the horrors of immolation.

His "nerves became thoroughly unstrung" (265) and he is prey to "perpetual horror," (265) His "mortal terrors would listen to no reason".[14] His fears, precipitate a belief, when awakening from sleep in the bunk of a ship, that he has been prematurely buried. In this context, all that he suffers is in fact the equivalent of actually being thus interred.

> The tortures endured, however, were indubitably quite equal, for the time, to those of actual sepulchre.

Poe's tale is designed to stress the importance of fear in causing the semblance of a traumatic burial. It is specifically stated that such fears "must sleep or they will devour us -- they must be suffered to slumber or we perish". (268) "The Premature Burial" would seem to sequentially and thematically resolve the universal fear of death as cause for premature burial, displayed in "The Mask of the Red Death" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". The narrator in Poe's later story finally throws away his "Night Thoughts" forever --

> From that memorable night, I dismissed forever my charnel apprehensions, and with them vanished the cataleptic disorder, of which, perhaps, they had been less the consequence than the cause. (268)

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[14] Note the similarity in intensity between this narrator's fears and the murderer's (and victim's) in "The Tell-Tale Heart". See footnote 13.

When Montresor walls up Fortunato[15] alive in "The Cask of Amontillado", he is both punishing his enemy and performing a foundation sacrifice. The punishment does not achieve its end, for according to Montresor -- "A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser", (274) The sacrifice, however, is successful, as the catacombs remain undisturbed for fifty years.

Montresor begins his story with a discussion of the nature of the punishment he wishes to inflict on Fortunato.

> 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 him wrong. (274)

Poe highlights the possibility that the punishment to follow may fall short of its expectations. As the tale continues to progress, few intimations of Montresor's failure are noted except perhaps in a humour which strikes the reader but not the characters in the tale. The absurdity of Fortunato's cough written: "Ugh! ugh! ugh! -- ugh! ugh! ugh! -- ugh! ugh! ugh! -- ugh! ugh! ugh!" (276) is apparent. Irony is encouraged throughout by Montresor's manipulation of Fortunato, heightening the success of the punishment rather than its

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[15] The name Fortunato could possibly have been derived from D'Israeli's Curiosities of Literature. In an article entitled "Dethroned Monarchs", describing the levelling of royalty to peasantry, the first word is interestingly "Fortune". The first sentence reads: "Fortune never appears in a more extravagant humour then when she reduces monarchs to become mendicants". (65)

failings.

The failure of the retribution (in Montresor's own terms) occurs in the final paragraphs of the tale. During these last moments when Fortunato is chained to the wall, Montresor's lack of impunity comes to the foreground.

> A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a moment I hesitated -- I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope within it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hands upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed -- I added. I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this and the clamourer grew still. (278, Italics mine)

It is impossible to ascertain exactly what Montresor feels, -- whether guilt or fear. Whatever, his trembling and hesitation, even if momentary, destroy his supposed impunity. His own family motto is ironically reversed on him and becomes instead the motto of Fortunato. "Nemo me impune lacessit". (276) Montresor is afraid he has failed to "make himself felt". (274) Fortunato's laughter has an unnerving affect on him.

> But now there came from out the niche a laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. (278, Italics mine)

Montresor no longer controls the situation. He is nervous and uncertain -- contrary to his own definition of the proper "avenger".

> But to these words I harkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud: 'Fortunato'!

> No answer. I called again: 'Fortunato' ... I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of bells. My heart grew sick -- on account of the dampness of the catacombs. (279, Italics mine)

How can a heart grow sick because of dampness? It cannot! Montresor is but rationalizing (reiterated by the dash after sick). His heart is sick with his own weakness, insecurity, and failure at accomplishing a true punishment.

Although the burial fails in Montresor's terms as punishment, it does successfully accomplish a foundation sacrifice. The interment took place on "the damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors" (275) within the deepest recesses of the family vaults. The Montresors "were a great and numerous family" (276) and ironically Fortunato drinks "to the buried that repose around us" (276) little knowing that he will soon join their repose, in order to protect the vaults from decay and destruction. Montresor's description of the locale of the burial is crucial to the documentation of the sacrifice.

> Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing bones, we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs. (277, Italics mine)

Fortunato is walled between the supports of the catacombs, in order to sustain them. He is placed at the very center of the foundation of the family vault.

> For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. In pace requiescent! (279)

The catacombs are obviously safe. For fifty years they have remained unaltered. The foundation sacrifice has been a success; Poe has once again described a premature burial true to its traditions.

The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is entombed as a form of punishment by the judges of the Inquisition. The tale centers around the punishments employed -- premature burial hardened by cruel tortures within the crypt. As in "The Cask of Amontillado" fruition of the punishment is thwarted. The narrator, through his pathological rationality, circumvents the designs of his persecutors.

> The sentence -- the dread sentence of death -- was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. (246)

The narrator is sentenced by the "black-robed judges" to a death "with its most hideous moral horrors". (250) He is placed in a prison in darkness, prey to rumours he had heard of the horrors of Toledo. He does not remain inactive but sets out to ascertain the size of his dungeon. To this end, he rips some of his garment to make a marker so that he will not retrace his own steps. He falls asleep, awakes, and continues, falling at the edge of a deep pit. He throws a rock in the hole and harkens to its echo as it eventually plunges into water at the bottom. The pit has been designed by the judges as his final fate -- but he has circumvented their intended punishment.

> I saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me, and congratulated myself on the timely accident by which I had escaped. Another step before my fall, and the world had seen me no more. (250)

In reality, it is an accident based on the narrator's amazing rationality which has saved him from the Inquisitorial scheme. The shredding of his garment in order to mark his location has occasioned the life-saving fall.

The narrator falls asleep, awakes, and is drugged again to sleep. Upon reawakening for the second time, he finds himself bound to a framework of wood. Above him is a figure of time with a pendulum swinging even lower. Beside him there is some meat which several enormous rats are attempting to eat. He recognizes the doom prepared for him and tells of the judges who, thwarted the first time, must try again by means of the pendulum to punish the narrator.

> My cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents -- the pit, whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself -- the pit, typical of hell and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments -- The plunge into the pit I avoided by the merest of accidents, and I knew that surprise, or entrapment into torment, formed an important portion of all the grotesquerie of these dungeon deaths. Having failed to fall, it was no part of the demon plan to hurl me into the abyss, and thus (there being no alternative) a different ... destruction awaited me. (253)

The pendulum swings steadily back and forth; its "acrid" breath drives the narrator mad. It travels down, down; the rats beside him become bold swarming over his food. The victim tries to figure out a means of escape. He thinks that perhaps the blade will cut the surcingle, but in this

hope is mistaken. He "thought", rationally calculating how to avoid the doom imposed upon him. In the last moments, he seizes the idea of using the ravenous rats to cut the rope with which he is bound. With an amazing will power he rubs the surcingle with the meat and allows the rats to crawl all over him chewing the ropes. At the last second he escapes through sustained will-power "their cold lips sought my own" (255) the fate of the judges.

> Nor had I erred in my calculations -- nor had I endured in vain. I at length felt that I was free ... I had scarcely stepped from the wooden bed of horror upon the stone floor of the prison, when the motion of the hellish machine ceased, and I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force, through the ceiling ... my every motion was undoubtedly watched ... (256)

Through an intense rationality never dispersing even at the final seconds, the narrator succeeds in frustrating the punishment intended by his judges.

The prison begins to shrink and the walls of iron become hot. The narrator realizes he is going to be forced by his punishers to enter the pit.

> The Inquisitorial vengeance had been hurried by my two-fold escape, and there was to be no more dallying with the King of Terrors. (257)

He is forced toward the pit, and is on the verge of becoming its victim when he is rescued by the arm of General Lasalle. "The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies". (259) It is the two rational escapes which allow the narrator enough time to be so rescued by the enemies of his jailers. The third and final attempt of his punishers, is thus indirectly

avoided by his rational behavior up to that point.

The classification of punishment as regards premature burial is fulfilled in "The Pit and the Pendulum". An intense rationality, a Dupin-like attitude even in the face of the greatest horrors and adversity, has circumvented the punishment. The narrator escapes the confines of the tomb, and becomes one of the few who are prematurely interred and live to tell the tale.

In "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym" premature burial occurs twice. In both instances Pym himself is the victim. It is difficult to classify the types of burial. In each instance, there is a lack of intention. Entombment can be described as accidental. Of the divisions previously mentioned, this most closely correlates to a type of mistaken burial.

More significant than the classification of the motif, is the nature of the entombment itself. There is a remarkable similarity between the two instances extending to "The Pit and the Pendulum" as well. All three burials involve an enclosed area, big enough to walk in, in which there is a concentrated effort to evaluate the tomb. "The Pit and the Pendulum" which Poe wrote after Pym, would seem to be the natural elaboration of the preceding scenes from his longest work.

The first time Pym is buried alive, he is trapped in the hold of the Grampus, due to a mutiny on deck blocking his means of egress. The second entombment involves Pym and

Peters, both of whom are caught beneath an avalanche caused by a violent explosion. The circumstances detailed, I will describe the similarities in the burials by means of a chart positing similar passages from both these episodes and "The Pit and the Pendulum". The passages shall be followed by a further short comparison of vocabulary.

Pym 1st Scene (Hold)	Pym 2nd Scene (Mountain)	"The Pit and the Pendulum"
Upon awakening I felt strongly confused in mind, and some time elapsed before I could bring to recollection all the various circumstances of my situation. (762)	As soon as I could collect my scattered senses, I found myself nearly suffocated, and grovelling in utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth, which was also falling upon me in every direction; threatening to bury me entirely. I then remained motionless for some moments, endeavoring to conceive what had happened to me, and where I was. (861)	I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence -- the dread sentence of death -- was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreary indeterminate hum. (246)
It was with the utmost difficulty I could crawl along at all ... Still I struggled forward by slow degrees dreading every moment that I should swoon amid the narrow and intricate windings of the lumber. (765)	At length Peters proposed that we should endeavor to ascertain precisely the extent of our calamity, and grope about our prison ... (862)	This process, however, afforded me no means of ascertaining the dimensions of my dungeon, as I might make its circuit and return to the point whence I set out ... In groping my way around the prison, I could not fail to encounter this rag ... (249)
I felt helpless of being even able to read the note of Augustus ... The phosphorous of which there was a speck or two, I gathered up as well as I could, and returned with it ... (768)	... And indeed for sometime we thought insurmountable ... We took courage, however, from despair. (862)	It was <u>hope</u> -- the hope that triumphs on the rack -- that whispers to the death -- condemned even in the dungeons of the Inquisition. (254)

Pym 1st Scene	Pym 2nd Scene	"The Pit and the Pendulum"
My sensations were those of extreme horror and dismay ... I could summon up no connected chain of reflection, and, sinking on the gloor, gave way, unresistingly, to the most gloomy imaginings. (766)	For a long time we gave up supinely to the most intense agony and despair ... no incident ever occurring in the course of human events is adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress than a case like our own. (861)	And then I felt suddenly calm, and lay smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble. (253)
I have before stated more than once that my intellect, for some period prior to this, had been in a condition nearly bordering on idiocy. (769)	[Not interred long enough for this state to set in].	Long suffering had nearly annhilated all my ordinary powers of mind. I was an imbecile -- an idiot. (253)
Those only who have been suddenly redeemed from the jaws of the tomb. (773)	A few struggles more, and we reached the bend, when, to our inexpressible joy, there appeared a long seam or crack extending upward ... a clear passage into the open air. (862)	An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. (257)

Pym 1st Scene	Pym 2nd Scene	"The Pit and the Pendulum"
1. dark (768)	darkness (862)	darkness (246)
2. death (763)	dead (862)	death (246)
3. despair (763)	despair (862)	despair (254)
4. agony (763)	agony (862)	agony (246)
5. horror (763)	horror (862)	horror (246)
6. torments (767)	tormented (863)	tormentors (256)
7. awe-inspiring (763)	awe (862)	wonder (252)
8. entombed (766)	entombed (861)	tomb (248)
9. struggling (773)	struggled (862)	struggled (253)
10. weak (765)	weak (864)	weak (253)
11. exhausted (767)	exhausted (864)	excessive fatigue (249)
12. ascertain (766)	ascertain (863)	ascertaining (250)
13. rational (768)	rationally (861)	reason (248)
14. sensations (766)	senses (861)	senses (246)
15. light (764)	light (863)	light (248)
16. joy (766)	joy (863)	joy (253)

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* I have arranged these words so as to approximate the nature of the premature burials which they describe. In the tales, all the victims find themselves interred, express agony at their predicament, strive rationally to escape their fate, and in the end reach light, -- or salvation.

Although the classification of the burial may differ, it is apparent that in "Pym" and the "Pit" the burials themselves are strikingly similar. In the following stories to be discussed, premature burial is treated with humour, contrary to Poe's usual use of the motif.

"Some Words With a Mummy" and "Loss of Breath" treat premature burial in a comic fashion, while both represent burials which occur by mistake. Poe's treatment of premature interment in these two comic pieces is diametrically opposed to the attitude expressed in his gothic tales. The burial alive which he described as the "Ultima Thule" "adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress" (861) becomes instead a subject of slight irritation and boredom.

Count Allamistakeo is brought back to life by a group of Egyptologists who are, as can be expected, astounded that he is alive. The Count explains that the Egyptians had discovered an embalming process that consisted in,

> immediately arresting, and holding in perpetual abeyance, all the animal functions subjected to the process ..., in whatever condition the individual was, at the period of embalment, in that condition he remained. (542)

Buried alive by mistake, the Count had but to be revivified in order to resume living.

Allamistakeo quite easily talks of his own entombment, and further of the voluntary practice of being buried alive out of "curiosity".

> An historian, for example, having attained the age of five hundred, would write a book with great labour and then get himself carefully embalmed, leaving instructions to his executors pro tem, that they should cause him to be revivified after the lapse of a certain period ... (543)

As the story comes to a close, the narrator himself decides since his wife is a "shrew" (547) and he is sick of the nineteenth century, he would like to be buried for a few hundred years.

Premature burial is treated as mere whim; it lacks the horror, despair, and agony attributed to it in other tales. In "Some Words With a Mummy", it is related to a need (and not a necessary one) to satisfy curiosity and escape the bores of the world.

A comically blasé attitude toward premature burial is most poignantly highlighted in "Loss of Breath". Lackobreath is thought dead after having been hanged and is placed in a burial vault. Poe makes a farce out of the usual superstitions and terrors of the burial crypt. A line of Manston's "Malcontent" comes to Lackobreath's mind -- "Death's a good fellow and keeps an open house." (401) He declares it a "palpable" lie. How different this is from "the uttermost agonies of living inhumation" (266) expressed in another of Poe's tales! Lackobreath is troubled with "ennui" (401) as a result of a lack of "amusement" (401) in the crypt. He walks about the tomb taking the tops off coffins, making pronouncements on those within. We are struck by the contrast

with "The Premature Burial" and that narrator's horrific vision of the dead within their coffins. Lackobreath treats the dead with indifference, laughing and mocking them.

He begins abusing a corpse and to his surprise it comes to life.[16] It is Windenough, who was victim of "epilepsis" caused by catching Lackobreath's breath. Buried by mistake, he is irritated by the stupidity of those who buried him -- little more.

> -- damn all fools! They took me up for dead, and put me in this place -- pretty doings all of them ... (402)

Neither of the two express any fear at being thus entombed, but are busied in arrangements for the return of the loss of breath. Their escape is effected without urgency, "the united strength of their voices" was heard above. They waited for a treatise on "the nature and origin of subterranean voices" (404) to receive a "reply -- rejoinder -- confutation -- and justification" (404) before making good their departure from the vault.

Although Poe deals with the motif in a comic way in these two tales, generally as he uses the motif, he is more concerned with its effects of horror -- its anti-comical nature. Premature burial represents life, a life which to Poe was most often tragic, although occasionally interspersed with moments of comedy.

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[16] Interestingly, in this story, as in "Some Words With a Mummy", it is the stimulation of the nose which brings the sleeper to life.

CHAPTER VI

THE MOTIF AND POE'S UNIVERSE

The motif of premature burial is representative of the entire body of Poe's work. Poe explored the shadowy boundary between life and death with a rationality reminiscent of his character Dupin. The universe was for Poe, a tomb, limited, as opposed to unlimited, examinable through rationality, yet always too illusive and varying for a final circumscription.

Biographically, Poe was "buried" within the mundane life of an everyday existence in 19th century America. Alienated by his genius and his circumstance, orphaned, often destitute, he labored under the shadow of personal failure complicated at times by physical and mental ill-health. Nevertheless, he struggled to confront countless treatises attempting to elucidate final worldly truths; strived to reconcile their discrepancies in his own art. All of this he quested after, in the thinning air of a personal existence which eventually suffocated him. "Buried alive", -- socially often alone, Poe explored the universe not only of the crypt but of his own soul. It was an examination made possible by his isolation -- by the finality of his enclosure, and the

effect of an insulated existence.

> Literature is that experience by which consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness.[1]

Poe's inevitable consciousness is what isolates his thought, creating a world (like the crypt) "Out of Space -- Out of Time".[2] The consciousness extends to the realm of the indefinable in sleep, swoon, in death, and in the dream. ("In the deepest slumber -- no! In delerium -- no! In a swoon -- no! In death -- no! Even in the grave all is not lost").[3] In these states, the only possible existence for the dreamer is in the dream, the only reality -- the pseudo-reality. An awareness of the dream state separates the dreamer from it. In a split second he is but remembering the dream turned to memory. "Yet a second afterward (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed".[4] Even the memory can prove illusive.

> Such is the universe of the dreams ... Nothing of it subsists. It has entirely perished, and in

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[1] Georges Poulet, The Metamorphosis of the Circle (Baltimore, 1966), pp. 182-202 quote by Maurice Blanchot. Poulet's article provides the basis for my argument concerning Poe's encircled thought.

[2] Poe, "Dream-Land", 8.

[3] Ibid., p. 247.

[4] Ibid.

> contemplating its destruction, the contemplator, in a sense witnesses his own destruction. He is dead yet he is still alive.[5]

Poe's expositors of the indefinable are dead yet alive -- as are his protagonists in the tombs in which they are buried. Thought destroys the dream, but a state of consciousness gives no respite from a destructive knowledge.

One terror is interchanged for another. The horror of not knowing one's own state is altered to the equally horrifying state of knowing.

> In enlarging the circle of its understanding, the spirit has therefore only ascertained the reasons of its terror. The wider the knowledge of its doom becomes, the narrower appears the span of its doomed life. Once again the mind discovers itself surrounded by a circle, a circle whose limits, formed by a fatal combination ... leaves no possibility of egress ...[6]

The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" as he becomes more and more conscious of the nature of his prison (universe) despairs because he learns of "the doom which had been prepared"[7] for him. His growing knowledge is something taken "desperately"[8] to heart.

For Poe, to be unconscious is to experience a conscious terror and yet to be conscious is to be a victim of

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[5] Poulet, p. 191.

[6] Ibid., p. 197.

[7] Poe, p. 250.

[8] Ibid.

terror as well. The system of his thought is closed; from it, like the tomb, there is no escape.

> In the dream as in the awakening, in stupor as in full consciousness, the mind always finds itself encircled. It is in a sphere whose walls recede or draw together, but never cease to enclose the spectator. Pleasure and terror, extreme passivity and extreme watchfulness, hyperacuity of the senses and of the intellect, are the means by which the mind recognizes the insuperable continuity of its limits. No one before Poe has shown with as much precision the essentially circumscribed character of thought.[9]

According to Eureka , the universe was formed from one infinitely divisible particle, but is limited to that original unity which began the universe and into which it will inevitably return.

> In the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation.[10]

The measured universe reflects Poe's measured ideas. Limited, highlighted through "insulated incident", premature burial represents Poe's thought in general, equally insulated and limited.

Consigned to the dungeon, the prisoner must ascertain the dimensions of his tomb and attempt to place himself within that space. He must try to know his enclosed universe as intimately as possible. This is the heart of Poe's thought -- the description of the universe of man within its

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[9] Poulet, p. 199.

[10] Edgar Allan Poe, The Works, ed. Rufus Griswold, Redfield and Co. (London, 1856), p. 118.

limited sphere.

> It seems feasible to conclude that Poe, like the narrator in 'The Imp of the Perverse', deliberately wore his 'fetters' and tenanted his 'cell of the condemned' in order to shatter his reader's complacency, in order to convince them in keeping with the poetic passion, that their most noble activity was and always would be the quest for 'Supernal Beauty'.[11]

A voluntary captivity in order to "shatter" the reader's complacency is stressed by Garrison. This is not the case. Poe was a prisoner of his limited thought and universe as a result of the natural position of man; his reason for tenanting a cell was because that cell existed. If he chose to probe the phantasm fear in "The Premature Burial", it was because the human psyche expresses fears; fears of death and burial, fears which "devour us".[12]

Poe believed "Supernal Beauty" the highest good of man, but was aware that man's brain was diverse; occupied with other varying thoughts. He did not, therefore, want good to spring from man's perverse instinct, he wished only to describe that instinct in its own terms. He wanted to delineate the truths of Existence which would posit the truth of Essence. In this light, horror proved a vehicle by which to encourage man to understand the universe and his own emotions -- to insularize that part of man's experience which is summarized in the tomb.

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[11] Garrison, p. 150.

[12] Poe, p. 268.

Poe pointed to both sides of man. He gave us beauty in

> ... those Nicéan barks of yore
> that gently o'er the perfumed sea
> The weary, way-worn wanderer bore ...[13]

and its opposite in

> Uprising, unveiling, affirm
> That the play is the tragedy 'Man'
> And its hero the Conqueror Worm.[14]

But one does not point to the other. They merely suggest the limits of the human spectrum -- they describe the extremes of the enclosure represented by man's capabilities.

> In Poe's world view, then, it is the perverse nature of things that man, as an individual, thinking creature, is subject to the 'indignities' of ignorance and of ultimate annihilation of self. But through a 'Lynx eyed' vision of the demonic (of the perversity of the universe and one's own mind), man may still retain some of the dignity he feels in himself as a rational and feeling entity buried alive in the vast impersonal or malevolent system of the universe.[15]

The characters buried alive in Poe's tales do not give themselves up to despair -- but fight through rationality to know their vaults and escape them. In a like fashion, man imprisoned within the limits of a universe which contains the spirit of the perverse and will eventually return to unity, trapped by the terror of continual consciousness,

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[13] Poe, "To Helen", 2-4.

[14] Poe, "The Conqueror Worm", 30-32.

[15] G. R. Thompson, Poe's Fiction, University of Wisconsin Press (Wisconsin, 1973), p. 195.

must achieve dignity by ascertaining (like Dupin), as many of the facts as are available concerning the limits of his universe.

APPENDIX

1. Chapter IV, Footnote 36

In my research into the background of the motif of premature burial, I ran across an interesting superstition in folklore, which might have come to the attention of Poe, involving the fixation upon teeth in "Berenice". Although it is documented later than Poe's era, it is stressed in various sources that the superstitions are based on legends and beliefs which span the barrier of time. In Folklore, A Journal of Folklore Studies for 1894, there appeared the following passage under miscellaneous:

> Burial of Teeth with Body at Cornwall -- An aged woman, known in the village as old Fanny, died ... nine years ago ... Fanny was a devoted churchwoman, and took great interest in foreign missions for which she saved out a scanty pittance. But she firmly believed that every tooth she possessed (she preserved all she lost in a box for the purpose) must be buried with her against the Day of Resurrection. She exacted a promise from the good clergyman and his wife that the teeth should be placed in her coffin ... Fanny firmly believed that the resurrection body would not be perfect without the teeth, as far as I could make out, but I had the impression that there was a special virtue in the things themselves.[1] (Italics mine)

In the 1895 issue of Folklore, there are further articles

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[1] Folklore, A Journal of Folklore Studies, Vol. 5, 1894, p. 55n.

under "Superstititions about Teeth." The information related is similar to the above, except the retention of teeth is given as a more general practice and belief.

> This superstition is current in Wakefield and Sheffield[2] and also in the north of Derbyshire. It is of old standing.[3] (Italics mine)

The superstitions which were circulated in England, might have reached Poe's ears when, as a child, he was at school there. The singular nature of these tales would not be easily forgotten by Poe -- so interested in burial.

There are many sources for Poe's fixation already documented.[4] It appears that dentistry was growing during Poe's age and frequent reference to it appeared in the popular magazines. I quote one advertisement which I came across in The New-York Mirror of August 1831:

> 'To the ladies! White and sound teeth are both an ornament and a blessing. The best security for their advantage is to be found in the use of the British Antiseptic Dentrfrice. This elegant tooth powder,

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[2] Bittner, in his biography, states that Poe travelled through Sheffield.

[3] Folklore, Vol. VI, p. 86.

[4] Killis Cambell suggested Poe found the subject of his tale in a paragraph about grave robbers seeking teeth for dentists in the Baltimore Saturday Visitor for 23 February, 1833. It has been suggested that "An Event in the Life of a Dentist" (The New-York Mirror, 6 April, 1833) is also a source of Poe's tale. Finally, "The Death's Head" appearing in Phantasmagocia concerns an antiquary who carries off the teeth of a corpse and is thought a possible source.

> with a very little use, eradicates the scurvy in the gums and prevents the accumulation of tartar which not only blackens but loosens the teeth and accelerates their decay. The dentifrice thus removes the prevailing courses of offensive breath, preserves the healthiness and fluoridousness of the gums and renders the teeth beautifully white'.[5]

I do not claim these superstitions or reference to teeth responsible for Poe's use of that motif in his tale. But they could have been a part of a greater number of superstitions, articles, and the like, which did give him the inspiration for Egaeus' fixation.

2. Chapter IV, Footnote 62.

In Thomas Allen's The History and Antiquities of London (London, 1827), the plague and its effect on the city and people of London is detailed. It becomes evident that Poe was indeed presenting a very credible report in both "The Mask of the Red Death" and in "King Pest". (Perhaps this account had even served as a source for his tales).

> ... that the citizens in despair gave over their endeavours to extinguish it, so in the plague, it came at last to such violence, that the people sat still looking at one another, and seemed quite abandon'd to despair; whole streets seemed to be desolated, and not to be shut up only, but to be emptied of their inhabitants; doors were left open, windows stood shattering with the wind in empty houses, for want of people to shut them. In a word, people began to give up themselves to their fears, and to think that all regulations and methods were in vain, and that there was nothing to be hoped for, but an universal desolation ... (385)

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[5] The New-York Mirror, 1831 August. (Inside cover).

But I must speak of the plague at its height, raging even to desolation, and the people under the most dreadful consternation, even, as I have said, to despair. It is hardly credible to what excesses the passions of men carry'd them in this extremity of distemper; and this part, I think was as moving as the rest ... (385)

Many houses were left desolate, all the people being carry'd away dead, and especially in an alley further on, the same side ... there were several houses together, which (they said) had not one person left alive in them ... (387-388)

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