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Feeling with Fiction: Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative Empathy in the
Gothic Tales of Edgar Allan Poe

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To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Elise Anderson find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

This project examines the narrative structure of five of Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic tales to determine how the use of narration, point of view, and characterization test readers' abilities to empathize with ethically problematic characters. Grounded in both narrative and cognitive literary studies, this thesis explores the variety of empathic responses evoked by Poe's narrators, all influenced by how readers interpret each narrator's thoughts, actions, and feelings using their Theory of Mind capabilities. This study demonstrates that taking the perspective of difficult characters who diverge from most readers' conceptions of morality is possible, challenging the traditionally positive theorization of narrative empathy. I argue that readers experience empathy for a wide variety of characters, even those as challenging as Poe's notorious narrators, who provoke a broad array of negative emotions such as fear and disgust, yet have remained popular because of their provocative first-person perspectives since the early nineteenth century.

Chapter 1:

Introduction: Narrative Empathy and Poe's Narrators

The process of empathizing with characters through imaginative extension is one of the primary appeals of reading fiction, as it enables readers¹ to enter storyworlds that offer experiences unavailable to them by any other means.

Engrossed reading allows readers to vicariously enter the perspective of characters who are exciting, heroic, and maybe even rebellious, through a simulation that ultimately results in various forms of empathy. Narrative empathy has traditionally been associated with positive emotions, evoked by characters who bear similarities to readers; congruencies in value systems, gender, ethnicity, and even social stratification can enable readers to establish connections with characters. However, empathy for fictional characters is not restricted to those of the easy, likable variety. In fact, Suzanne Keen argues that “temporarily bonding with monsters, madmen, and villains can be regarded as not anomalous, but as a standard feature of fiction” (131). As Keen’s argument suggests, readers are capable of experiencing empathy for all kinds of characters, although taking the perspective of some can be challenging and problematic. For example, many of Edgar Allan Poe’s narrators are notorious for evoking negative emotional responses from readers because of their shocking, immoral behavior—they are frequently admitted murderers who proudly confess their crimes in vivid detail.

The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” for instance, describes how he murders an

¹ The reader referenced throughout this project refers to the trans-historical reader traditionally used in cognitive literary studies. This hypothetical reader is not bound to any cultural or historical context, but represents the individual consumer of fiction who responds empathically to narratives based on his/her ability to take the perspectives of characters in Poe’s texts.

old man, his friend, who did nothing to provoke him. He boasts of how he dismembers the corpse, cutting off “the head, and the arms and the legs” before concealing it “cleverly, so cunningly” beneath the planks of flooring in the old man’s chamber (205). Still, there is something provocative in taking the narrator’s perspective because it occupies such a forbidden moral space; he is a murderer, which makes empathizing with his character difficult and presses against the limits of narrative empathy. This project looks specifically at several of Poe’s stories whose narrators challenge readers’ capacities and desires to empathize with unsavory characters. However, it is my contention that Poe’s strategies of narration, the way he frequently employs first-person focalization as well as aspects of characterization, resists the traditionally positive theorization of narrative empathy by inviting readers to empathize with characters who proudly confess their criminality.

Narrative empathy, as I will be using it in subsequent chapters, refers to the spontaneous sharing of feeling induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining ourselves in the situations of fictitious characters. Amy Coplan effectively describes empathy as “a complex imaginative process involving both cognition and emotion”; it is taking up a character’s psychological perspective to imaginatively experience, to at least some degree, what he or she has experienced (143). When we empathize while reading fiction, then, we do just that: we imagine what a particular character is experiencing through a type of cognitive simulation that enables us to “experience emotions that are qualitatively the same as those of the [character]” (Coplan 144). One of the main benefits of such a simulation is that it gives readers an opportunity to adopt a variety of perspectives

unavailable to them in real world situations. Keen acknowledges that “whether we feel with characters in the emotional accord of empathy, identify with them through deliberate role taking, or experience spontaneous character identification, we come away from engrossed reading with the sense of knowing more about others, and also about the alien cultures sometimes called upon by fictional worlds” (101). Empathizing with fictional characters has the potential to broaden readers’ perspectives because it provides a safe space for them to experience emotions and to explore new territory through imaginative extension. In other words, readers can use fiction as a vehicle for understanding many kinds of “others,” by taking characters’ perspectives in a limitless number of possible storyworlds.

While this may sound like an almost magical guarantee of the worthiness of fiction, it is important to acknowledge that reading invokes a broad spectrum of emotions as readers are pressed to empathize with characters who proudly breach moral and ethical boundaries. Indeed, feeling with fiction does not mean that the emotional responses readers experience will be positive. Keen argues quite effectively that “empathic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states” (72). This means that while empathy can invoke feelings of happiness and joy, it can also invoke feelings of horror and disgust. In fact, readers can have such aversive emotional responses towards characters and narrative situations that they experience a condition Keen calls empathic over arousal, an empathic response that results in personal distress, ultimately causing readers to stop reading and even avoid similar fiction in the future (19). “The Black Cat,” for example, is a story of Poe’s that has the potential

to produce an over aroused empathic response in readers because of the psychopathic behavior of the narrator who feels no empathy for his victims and shows no signs of remorse for his murderous behavior. For example, he cuts out the eye of his cat with a pocketknife and then hangs him from the limb of a tree (209). Taking his perspective is extremely challenging because his callous, deceptive behavior is difficult to interpret as his actions are not in accordance with the reasoning he supplies in his own confession. And further, because his reporting of events is so suspicious, interpreting his behavior is highly frustrating due to the complexities inherent in rationally assigning mental states to a character who proves to be highly unreliable.

Using ToM to assign mental states to characters in order to interpret their behavior is an important component of experiencing empathy for them because it also determines, to a large degree, readers' emotional responses toward them. Cognitive literary theorists such as Lisa Zunshine and Blakey Vermeule have emphasized the importance of ToM in literature. Zunshine describes ToM as "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires" (6). Vermeule extends this description by defining ToM as a process that allows readers to "simulate other people's states of mind using imitation and empathy . . . cognitively putting ourselves in another person's shoes and allowing ourselves vicariously to go through whatever they are going through" (35). Empathy and ToM are intimately connected processes, as ToM is the cognitive tool used by readers to empathize with fictional characters. Consequently, the attributions readers make about a character's mental state result in the level of empathic response they are able to experience.

For example, when reading “The Tell-Tale Heart,” readers are prompted to use their ToMs to determine the narrator’s sanity. Consider the following passage where the narrator describes his surveillance of his victim, the old man, while sleeping:

When I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man’s sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this?” (203)

By using ToM readers are likely conclude that the behavior of the narrator in this instance is neither wise nor rational as his actions and language betray his probable madness. His speech is fragmented and repetitive as he explains how he spent nights upon end obsessively observing his victim. And further, he is persistently concerned throughout the narrative with convincing the reader that he is sane, an assertion that in itself causes one to be skeptical of his mental stability. The point I am arguing here is that it is through the process of using ToM to interpret the narrator’s behavior that readers are able to make judgements regarding his mental state, which results in their ability to empathize, or not, with his character.

It is important to note that ToM has several possible applications: it can be used by readers to interpret the behavior of characters, but it can also be

embedded into fictional discourse revealing the way characters use ToM to understand the behaviors of each other. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” another story I discuss throughout this project, ToM is adeptly used by Montresor, the narrator, to manipulate the much less mentally acute Fortunato. Montresor is repeatedly proud of the fact that he is able to disguise his true intentions from Fortunato. He says, “It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good-will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation” (233). Montresor is well aware that Fortunato is ignorant of his plans; and indeed, Fortunato cannot interpret Montresor’s behavior. Not only that, but Montresor uses ToM to interpret Fortunato’s behavior in order to lure him down into the catacombs to carry out his murderous plan. Within this narrative scenario readers must also use their ToMs to make judgements regarding Montresor’s behavior, and more particularly regarding his motive. In the beginning of the story, Montresor claims that he was repeatedly insulted by Fortunato, although the extent of his injuries are never revealed. We understand that he is seeking revenge, and desires to punish Fortunato with impunity (233). Further, he is both cautious and cunning, methodical in his planning, which might reasonably lead readers to understand that he is dangerous and capable of extreme vengeance because of his obvious dedication to his cause. Both applications of ToM in this story are useful in initiating empathic responses from readers, who learn not only from Montresor’s language, but also from his adept use and understanding of ToM the type of character he is, which makes taking his perspective complicated. Ultimately, empathizing with Montresor places readers

in an ethical bind by pushing them to take the perspective of a character who is consciously manipulative in the planning and execution of his victim.

However, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Poe's narrators is the way they complicate readers' abilities to take their perspectives by invoking negative emotions through their graphic descriptions of murder. The way that Poe's narrators resist and potentially inhibit empathic responses makes his stories and characters all the more worthy of narrative analysis. Poe's narrators frequently challenge the limits of narrative empathy through their intense first-person focalizations and characterizations, which creates a narrative distance between their characters and readers that is uncomfortably close. For example, the narrator of "The Black Cat" provides a graphic account of how he murders his wife and cat, replete with gory details that are uncomfortable if not disturbing to read. But perhaps the most unsettling details regarding the narrator's crimes are his continual assertions that he felt no remorse for his behavior. The first-person perspective in this story is unsettling because it forces readers into the disturbing psychological space of not just a murderer, but of a murderer who subverts expectations by unapologetically claiming he feels no guilt for his crimes. Feeling empathy for this narrator is particularly challenging because his psychology is so difficult to comprehend as it strays so far from many readers' conceptions of morality. Indeed, Poe's narratives are excellent candidates for research on narrative empathy because of their seemingly overt resistance to it.

Poe's narrators, because of their intense psychological focalization, have been a source of interest to many psychoanalytic critics for nearly a century. Many scholars, such as Amy Yang, have explored the psychological tension that

is so prevalent in Poe's distinctive brand of Gothic fiction. Yang suggests that Poe's fiction is "an attempt to solve the unexpected through logic and reasoning . . . delv[ing] into the criminal's mind, teasing out the underlying driving force for murder, even if the criminal was not actively aware of it at the time of the crime" (596-97). The concept of the unconscious motive is frequently applied to Poe's narrators to explore the reasons for their crimes beyond what their characters confess. The narrator in "The Black Cat," for example, suggests that the bullying he received as a child who loved animals ultimately resulted in the later mutilation and murder of his cat, Pluto. Applying narrative empathy to this story attempts to flesh out the narrator's motive, but also looks at how the structure of the narrative, particularly the first-person focalization, reveals that he is attempting to acquire the sympathy of readers by implying that he had little or even no control over his behavior. The manipulative nature of the narrator is ultimately exposed through his confession, making the earlier suggestions he offers regarding his motive seem ultimately insufficient. While psychoanalytic criticism works to explain the narrator's behavior in terms of his unconscious desires or repressed feelings, this project looks at how his character is constructed through his confession, exploring the effect his tightly focalized perspective has on readers who struggle to empathize with a man who shows such little remorse for murdering his spouse and mutilating his pet.

Both Historicist and New-historicist critics, on the other hand, such as Allan Lloyd-Smith have sought to situate Poe's work within a cultural context by looking at his contributions to the Gothic genre which reflected "a growing popular interest in psychology" (25). One potential pitfall, however, occurring in

many of these studies is to conflate Poe, the author, with his characters. James W. Gargano, in his landmark essay, “The Question of Poe’s Narrators,” argues that such literary analyses are based “on the untenable and often unanalyzed assumption that Poe and his narrators are identical literary twins and that he must be held responsible for all their wild or perfervid utterances; their shrieks and groans are too often conceived as emanating from Poe himself” (177). Gargano’s essay, written in 1963, is still revered by Poe critics because of his call to look at the style of prose as being distinct from its creator. Gargano suggests that the structure of Poe’s stories “compels the realization that they are more than the effusions of their narrators’ often disordered mentalities . . . [and] should be analyzed in terms of his larger artistic intentions” (177-78). There is much to be learned from the structure of Poe’s stories beyond how the cultural conditions of his day may have influenced his writings. There are many interesting textual clues to early nineteenth-century history in Poe’s narratives, such as the rapidly growing interest in psychological disorders such as insanity that can be found throughout his texts. However, as Gargano argues, Poe’s narratives offer the opportunity for readers and critics alike to consider how Poe’s narrators reveal their inadequacies through their language. This project diverges from historicist studies in that it considers Poe’s work through a narrative analysis that works to show how his stories, through their structures, create powerful emotional responses.

Interestingly, Gargano’s call to look at the narrative structure of Poe’s stories sixty-five years ago is highly applicable to recent developments in narrative theory. Aspects of characterization and focalization offer an unexplored

yet exciting way of looking at the narratives of Poe. Indeed, his narrators are notorious for inducing feelings of horror and fear, which is why they provide thought provoking subjects for a critical analysis of how far the boundaries of narrative empathy can be stretched. For instance, the majority of Poe's narratives are told from the first-person point of view, meaning that each story is focalized exclusively from the perspective of the narrator, which can be, at times, disturbing because of their behavior. However, the differences in how the narrators are characterized has the potential to result in varying empathic responses toward their characters. For example, Montresor, the narrator in "The Cask of Amontillado," appears to have at least some form of a motive, which makes him easier to empathize with than the narrator of "The Black Cat," who as previously mentioned provides absolutely no viable rationale for his actions. The existence of a motive makes it significantly easier to empathize with Montresor because he at least gives readers a plausible explanation for his behavior, even if they find it insufficient; his motive is logical and therefore easier for readers to understand, enabling them to establish an empathic connection with his character.

It is important to recognize, however, that characters, including Poe's narrators, are constructed through the process of narration. Alan Palmer argues that "characterization is a continuing process [that] consists of a succession of individual operations that result in a continual patterning and repatterning until a coherent fictional personality emerges" (40). The fictional personalities of Poe's narrators are constructed through how they report their patterns of behavior, which allows readers to make assumptions regarding the types of characters they are, or are likely to become. The narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," for example,

is characterized through his erratic patterns of speech, which likely causes readers to conclude that he is insane. Indeed, he opens his story with an unconvincing declaration of his sanity: “True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease has merely sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them” (203). Our first impression of the narrator is characterized by his extreme uneasiness, which is amplified by awkward breaks in his speech. Further, he acknowledges that accusations of madness have been made against him, which immediately makes his nervous behavior all the more suspect. The point is, even before we learn that the narrator has murdered the old man because of his “vulture eye,” his behavior is highly suspicious. Then, after receiving more information regarding his crime, readers are able to confirm their suspicions regarding his sanity, and solidify their feelings regarding his character.

Interestingly, it is the structure of Poe’s fiction that offers a new way of looking at narrative empathy that resists its traditionally positive theorization. One of the most common assumptions regarding narrative empathy is that it inevitably leads to prosocial responses or altruistic behavior (Keen 16). The problem with this perspective is that it conflates empathy, which is feeling what we believe to be the emotions of others, with sympathy, which are feelings that occur *for* another, which does not involve sharing the other’s experience. Coplan explains that “just as I can sympathize with another without trying to imagine the world from her perspective, I can also empathize with another without experiencing concern for her well-being” (145). Sympathy is frequently a product of empathy, because taking a person’s perspective has the potential to create a desire to help

the other. I mention this because the conflation between sympathy and empathy is one of the primary causes for the positive theorization of empathy that assumes taking a person's perspective directly correlates with altruistic behavior, which is a sympathetic emotional response. Poe's stories, because of the negative emotions they invoke, provide textual evidence that it is possible for readers to take the perspective of a character that does not result in feelings of sympathy.

Experiencing empathy for many of Poe's narrators is highly possible, while experiencing sympathy for them can be more challenging because their actions frequently negate any concern readers may feel for their characters.

Ultimately, it is the purpose of this project to explore the boundaries of narrative empathy through five of Poe's short stories: "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Black Cat." These particular stories were selected because of the anomalies and congruencies in their structures which reveal how aspects of characterization, focalization, and narrative distance evoke or inhibit empathic responses from readers. Chapter two is a comparative analysis of "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," which are both confessions of murder focalized from the first-person point-of-view. The narrative structure of these stories is strikingly similar; the point-of-view, theme, tone, and narrative distance all coincide. However, there are key differences exposed through each narrator's telling that are likely to separate the types of empathic responses that readers can experience. An analysis of the language in these stories gives insight into the interiority of each narrator and allows readers to draw conclusions regarding their mental states and motives, which likely results in differing empathic responses

towards their characters. For instance, the characterization of the narrators is vastly divergent. Montresor's language and behavior is lucid and calculating, which creates a barrier for empathizing with his character because his murder of Fortunato was so meticulously planned and executed. The language of the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," on the other hand, is nervous and frequently illogical, likely causing readers to question his sanity, which potentially deflects his accountability for murdering the old man. Both narrators, however, effectively challenge readers' abilities to empathize with dangerous, villainous characters.

The next chapter of this project looks at the influence of narrative distance on empathy in "The Fall of the House of Usher." In this story the narrator is not a villain; he is an observer describing the deteriorating state of his friend, Roderick Usher. Consequently, the reader is not given the same access to the interiority of the villain's character as in "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Cask of Amontillado." The narrator in this story is a mediator who participates with the reader in solving the mysteries of the Gothic surroundings that profoundly influence Roderick. The narrator mediates between the reader and Roderick, which limits readers' abilities to use ToM to understand the latter's behavior and thereby render judgement on his character. Ultimately, the focalization in this story facilitates an empathic connection with the narrator because it is through his perspective that we experience the mysteries of the House of Usher. The narrator experiences with perplexity the Gothic elements in the story, such as supernatural phenomena, death, and destruction, with the same wonder as the reader, which also encourages them to empathize with his character. Certainly, the reader can feel concern for Roderick *and* the narrator, but I would suggest that the construction of this story

creates a barrier for empathizing with Roderick. Ultimately, the balance of knowledge between what Roderick knows about the Gothic, and what the narrator and reader are trying to figure out, pushes the plot forward and results in the divergent empathic responses readers are likely to have towards the narrative's characters.

Finally, chapter four builds on the concept of empathic over arousal and questions whether the narrator in "The Black Cat" presses the boundaries of narrative empathy beyond its limits. This particular narrator is extremely challenging to empathize with because of his focus on perversity, or his deliberate desire to behave in an unethical manner merely for pleasure. This study begins by introducing the concept of perversity by examining "The Imp of the Perverse" to establish the problems this line of logic, or lack of logic, poses to narrative empathy. In "The Black Cat," the narrator's actions toward his wife and cat are confessed in a way that likely creates resistance to any connection with his character; he shows a complete lack of empathy for his victims and expresses no plausible justification for his behavior. There is no underlying motive for torturing and murdering his cat, only the confession of a euphoric pleasure derived from murderous actions that I argue has the potential to push readers towards an over aroused empathic response. The narrative distance between the reader and the narrator in "The Black Cat" is simply too close to allow for an empathic connection for many readers, which reinforces my earlier claims regarding how the structure of Poe's stories challenges the traditionally positive conceptions of narrative empathy.

I should make it clear that the challenges Poe's narrators pose to readers are not necessarily negative, as literature can and should challenge readers. In fact, one of Poe's greatest literary contributions is his ability to confront readers with narrators who expose their disturbing psychologies, what they were thinking and how they were feeling, when they committed acts of murder. The characterizations of these narrators naturally lend themselves to cognitive analyses of their characters because of their tight focalization—their apparent obsession with their confessions prompts readers to question their motives and make judgements regarding their behaviors. As Gargano observed years ago, “the point of Poe's technique is not to enable us to lose ourselves in strange or outrageous emotions, but to see these emotions and those obsessed by them from a rich and thoughtful perspective” (178). Gargano insightfully challenges readers and critics alike to consider how and why Poe's narrators have the power to evoke such powerful emotional responses. This resonates with the theory of narrative empathy, which I propose can and should be applied to difficult, even morally reprehensible characters, who have the potential to stretch and even press readers beyond their empathic limitations.

Chapter 2:

Theory of Mind, Motive, and Empathy in the “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”

“The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are two similarly constructed stories, both told from the first-person perspective of murderous narrators who proudly recount their criminality. However, the differences between the narrators, particularly in terms of characterization, have the potential to induce contrasting empathic responses. Indeed, the manner in which they present their thoughts and justify their behaviors is vastly divergent. Montresor, the narrator of “The Cask of Amontillado,” is methodical and manipulative, and exhibits no remorse for his abhorrent behavior. His thoughts are lucid, and he takes pride in his ability to repeatedly deceive Fortunato, the victim in the story who has allegedly insulted Montresor’s pride and honor repeatedly. The nameless narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” on the other hand, behaves in a much less rational manner. His thoughts and behavior are erratic, which is why he is unable to hide his crime while Montresor has escaped judgement for fifty years. The characterization of Montresor, his lack of remorse and deceptive nature, likely causes readers to be less forgiving of his actions than of the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” whose behavior is sporadic and agitated, making him appear much less sane than Montresor. Although he is still a murderer, the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” appears to be less in control of his behavior than Montresor, and it is the difference in mental acuity between the two narrators that influences readers’ judgments of their characters, judgements which determine levels of empathic response.

Ultimately, how we determine the sanity of each narrator is by employing our theory of mind (ToM), or mind reading capabilities, to understand their thoughts and actions, which are revealed through their patterns of behavior. Lisa Zunshine argues that “the very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call ‘characters’ with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires, and then to look for clues that would allow us to guess at their feelings and thus predict their actions” (10). This cognitive process of understanding is predicated on the focalization and characterization of narrators, who provocatively expose their thoughts and emotions, and persuade readers to empathize, or not, with their characters.

It is important to note that while ToM is used by readers to understand the behavior of characters, it is also used within the text to understand how characters are interpreting the actions of other characters within the storyworld. For example, Montresor is continually capitalizing on Fortunato’s deficient ToM. From their first meeting at the carnival, it is very clear that Fortunato is unable to discern the malicious intentions of Montresor who boasts that “neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my goodwill” (233). Montresor was pleased that he was successfully able to deceive Fortunato and continued, as was his plan, to smile in Fortunato’s face, who did not perceive that his smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation (233). There is no indication in the narrative that Fortunato suspects Montresor’s cunning plan. Indeed, Fortunato insists upon going to the vaults and picks up on none of Montresor’s duplicitous remarks. Montresor is very aware that the intoxicated Fortunato’s ToM is impaired, and he

uses this knowledge to his advantage. For example, when Fortunato says: “Enough . . . the cough is merely a nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die from a cough,” Montresor is quick to reply, “True—true” (283). The irony in this statement is that Montresor is not merely cordially agreeing with Fortunato; he is agreeing with him because he actually knows what the manner of Fortunato’s death will be. Montresor is clearly manipulating Fortunato, and Fortunato doesn’t know it, which effectively creates a tone of suspense.

By the time Montresor and Fortunato head to the vaults the suspense is thick for several reasons: we are aware that Montresor intends to kill Fortunato; but, more importantly, Fortunato is intoxicated and his judgment is impaired, which prevents him from using his own ToM to decipher the evil intentions of Montresor. The imbalance of mental acuity between the two characters gives us little hope that there will be a happy ending for Fortunato. Even still, the narrative situation is highly provocative in its structure; the willful withholding of information, such as Montresor’s motive, and the focalization from a dangerous narrator’s perspective, encourages readers to become invested in the story’s plot and prospective outcomes. Suzanne Keen explains that suspenseful situations “provoke physiological responses of arousal in readers even when they disdain the quality of the narrative” (74). The tight focalization of the narrative can be disturbing, particularly when Montresor describes Fortunato’s “succession of loud and shrill screams” as he buries him alive (237). However, because Montresor is the focalizer, it is necessary that we see the action of the narrative through his eyes. Regarding focalization H. Porter Abbot acknowledges that “just as we pick up varying intensities of thought and feeling from the voice that we hear, so also

do we pick up thought and feeling from the eyes we see through” (74). As disturbing as it may be to inhabit the perspective of a predator, the focalization is the narrative element that controls the level of suspense and directs our empathic responses towards the characters in the text.

Interestingly, the empathic responses, or emotions invoked by imagining or projecting ourselves into the fictional situations of Montresor or Fortunato are what fuel the desire we have—or perhaps do not have—to understand *why* the crime was committed. In other words, the empathic or personal distress invoked through the narration of events ignites curious ToMs to ask why Montresor was angry enough to meticulously plan and bury Fortunato alive. What were the “thousand crimes,” and could they possibly warrant murder? Elena Baraban and Patrick White have both argued that the motive was social justice, that Montresor was avenging his family’s honor. Fortunato had insulted him with impunity, and “punishing his offender [was] a matter of honor, a matter of fulfilling his duty before his noble ancestry” (52). Similarly, White claims that Montresor “is acting patriotic, as it were . . . [and] feels justified in killing on behalf of his family” (553). The text certainly offers evidence to support these claims. Montresor refers to his family as “great” and “numerous” (234). He also mentions his family’s coat of arms, which provides another clue for unravelling the crime: “A huge human foot d’or . . . the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel” (235). Metaphorically, the serpent represents Fortunato and Montresor represents the dominant heel that crushes his enemy. While this interpretation rings true, without knowing the nature of the offenses against Montresor (and possibly his family) it is impossible to know for sure because of his unreliability;

he is a murderer, which gives readers every reason to distrust the account he gives of his crimes. Even still, the theories offered by White and Baraban are certainly indicative of their own empathic responses. Interestingly, Montresor's ambiguity regarding his motive for murder increases the probability that readers will empathize with his character, because in order to unravel the mystery of the murder, readers must take his perspective.

Significantly, the very first sentence of the narrative provokes the question of motive by petitioning readers for empathy. He addresses the reader as "you, who so well know the nature of my soul" (233). This suggests that the key to figuring out Montresor's motive is intimately connected to understanding his true nature. This direct address further implies that Montresor's audiences will understand the nature of the injuries committed against him, his reasons for revenge. Montresor's deep seated hatred for Fortunato, his need to "punish [him] with impunity," is openly declared in the story's first sentence: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (233). The narrative dangles this carefully selected morsel of information in front of us and never lets us taste it; we are never told either the nature or extent of the injuries, only that they were sufficiently insulting to fuel an elaborate plot of revenge. Therefore, because we are not given an immediate motive, we have to look to Montresor's actions and psychology in order to make sense of his behavior. In other words, the withholding of crucial evidence in the narrative requires us to use our ToM capabilities in order to fill in the narrative gaps. Lisa Zunshine explains that "[i]t is our evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there must be a mental stance behind each physical action

and our striving to represent to ourselves that possible mental stance even when the author has left us with the absolute minimum of necessary cues for constructing such a representation” (853). The narrative deliberately leads us to believe that there are valid reasons, at least in Montresor’s mind, for murdering Fortunato, although we are given, as Zunshine suggests, minimal clues for discerning their adequacy. The narrative gaps, which in this instance are the missing pieces of information regarding the “thousand injuries” committed against Montresor, encourage readers to empathize with his character, which they must do if they are to make sense of his vengeful actions.

It is important to understand that taking Montresor’s perspective in order to flesh out a viable motive for murder is not necessarily comfortable for readers. The intense focalization from a murderer’s point-of-view may evoke feelings of repulsion because of the callous manner in which he confesses murdering Fortunato. For example, Montresor unremorsefully describes his final moments with Fortunato in the catacombs in the last words of his confession:

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. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. (237)

There is no emotional response from Montresor, no symptoms of regret to be gleaned from his behavior. Even in stating that his heart grew sick, readers’ expectations are subverted as he claims it is caused by the dampness of the

catacombs. Montresor's narration might well cause readers to feel repulsed by his behavior. However, it is important to note that negative emotions experienced for characters are just as suggestive of empathic responses as are positive emotions. Resisting the traditionally positive theorization of empathy, Keen explains that "empathic responses for fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative feeling states" (73). Therefore, emotions of disgust, sadness, and even horror are just as indicative of experienced empathy as happiness and joy.

It is both horrific and intriguing to enter the minds of Poe's pathological characters, even if it does feel morally dangerous and evokes feelings of fear and disgust. Keen convincingly suggests that inhabiting the dangerous realm of a villainous mind provides "a risk-mitigating opportunity to think and feel with those from whom we might ordinarily recoil in horror," which consequently results in some of the "much-touted advantages of fictional world making" (131). As the narrative draws us further into the criminal mind of Montresor, we experience Poe's conception of the mind, which Amy Yang describes as "a rotting, decaying space isolated from the outer world where lights barely shine through" (598). Montresor's mind, as he exposes it, certainly seems to have little light. However, his mind is the only vehicle for understanding available to readers throughout the narrative, which is why we are compelled to use our ToMs to fill in the narrative gaps regarding Montresor's motive for murder. Consequently, it is necessary to take Montresor's perspective if we are to render judgement regarding his actions, which determines the amount of sympathy we are inclined to feel towards his character.

There are certainly moments in the narrative where Montresor seems to be directly petitioning for readers' sympathy. As Montresor leads Fortunato through the catacombs, he stops several times to insist, albeit facetiously, that Fortunato return to his party because of the ominous dampness and nitre in the cavern that are causing his cough to become more pronounced. At one such point he says to Fortunato: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as I once was. You are a man to be missed. For me there is no matter" (235). Montresor is candidly attempting to provoke sympathy by detailing how Fortunato's previous insults have directly affected him. He is suggesting that Fortunato is responsible for what appears to be the ruin of his character, of his entire happiness. However, it is still impossible to ascertain what Fortunato actually did to provoke such wrath from Montresor, which makes these moments of sympathy rather fleeting. Indeed, just a moment later Montresor fetters Fortunato to a granite wall in the catacombs with two iron staples, and says: "Pass your hand . . . over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is very damp. Once more let me implore you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power" (236). Montresor's remarks to Fortunato are laced with irony, if not blatant sarcasm. Fortunato is chained to the wall, and Montresor has revealed his diabolical intentions, making it clear he has absolutely no intention of letting Fortunato return. This time, however, he openly acknowledges it, completing his task of punishing with absolute impunity. The sympathy felt for Montresor earlier has likely diminished as he displays his ability to remorselessly murder Fortunato in such an appalling manner, burying him alive slowly—brick by brick and tier by tier.

Had we been given an explicit motive for Fortunato's murder, our job of interpreting Montresor's behavior would be much easier. However, perhaps the more important question to consider is *why* we are driven to search for a motive in the first place. Blakey Vermeule argues that our unquenchable thirst for social information fuels our active ToMs that wrestle to understand the why:

Fiction makes two demands—suspend for a moment your worry about being duped, and give me your attention—and once the reader agrees, she is rewarded with the most intense cognitive stimulation imaginable. What kind of cognitive stimulation? Social Information. The deep truth about people's intentions—including, perhaps, one's own. (14)

Uncovering the intentions of Montresor requires a cognitive investment. It is reasonable for readers to expect recompense for paying attention to the disturbing confession of Montresor, although the reward we receive is perhaps unexpected. There is no definitive uncovering of a motive, and no punishment given to Montresor. In fact, the final words of Montresor are boastful, as he gloats that for half of a century no mortal has disturbed Fortunato's remains (237). The narrative structure denies readers from feeling that justice has been served. Even still, there are enough clues given throughout the narrative to allow readers to make conjectures regarding a motive which, as previously mentioned, evokes an empathic connection, however problematic, with his character.

Interestingly, Poe uses similar narrative techniques in the "The Tell-Tale Heart," which is also focalized from the first-person point of view and is the proud confession of a murderous narrator. In this story, the characterization of

the narrator is arguably the most provocative narrative element as it establishes his insanity. Keen argues that specific aspects of characterization such as naming, description, depicted actions, quality of attributed speech, and representation of consciousness contribute to readers' abilities to empathize with fictional characters (93). It is difficult to empathize with the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" because his language is agitated and his behavior is extreme. For example, he acts and speaks in an irrational manner claiming he had no motive for murder other than the old man's "hideous eye." Of this he says:

I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. 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 rid myself of the eye forever. (138)

The narrator has no discernable, rational motive, which places him in stark contrast to Montresor who was highly motivated by revenge. Ultimately, it is the difference in the mental clarity of the two narrators that defines their rationales for murder. Montresor is characterized as a cunning, proficient murderer while the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is far less careful and logical in his ability to execute and conceal his crime. Of the two narrators, it is more difficult to empathize with Montresor because he appears to be in better control of his behavior, while the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" struggles to understand the irrationality of his actions, which potentially diminishes his accountability.

It is significant to note that the differences between the narrators' mental lucidity is exposed through their abilities to use ToM to understand the behavior of those around them. In contrast to the methodical and observant Montresor, the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" shows a deficiency of ToM. He incorrectly attributes mental states to both the old man and the police who come to question him, and even misinterprets his own behaviors from time to time. The police, having arrived to question him regarding a "shriek that had been heard by a neighbor in the night" were supposedly satisfied with the narrator's response: "The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream" (205). The narrator might have deceived the police, had it not been for his inability to correctly attribute mental states to others. The initially over-confident narrator grossly misinterprets the congenial behavior of the police who lingered, chatting pleasantly. Ultimately, the narrator's deficient ToM betrays him; he believes he—and the police—hear the loud beating of the dead man's heart, which causes him to reveal the dismembered corpse to the authorities: "Was it possible they heard it not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think" (206). It is unlikely readers believe, of course, that the narrator actually hears the dead man's beating heart, which reveals that his interpretations of the policemen's behaviors are incorrect; there are no textual clues that the police have any overt suspicions that the narrator killed the old man, not to mention the fact that dead hearts don't beat. The narrator's ToM is inaccurate, which causes him to expose his criminality and insanity to the police.

The fact that the narrator exposes his crime is not at all shocking because of his consistent unreliability. Unreliable narrators, according to James Phelan, are notorious for “misreporting, misreading, and misregarding or underreading, underreporting and underregarding” (qtd. in Zunshine 78). This narrator is unreliable in that he misreports, misregards, and most certainly misreads. His unreliability is exposed in the story’s opening paragraph where he argues that his disease (insanity) has merely sharpened his senses: “True!—nervous—dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses, not destroyed—not dulled them . . . I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?” (138). The narrator’s persistent claim that he is sane, followed by his assertion that he hears things that are inaudible, might likely lead readers to the conclusion that he does not understand the nature of his own disease. In fact, the narrator’s nervousness, combined with his irrational claim that he has heard many things in heaven and hell, contradicts his argument regarding his sanity; indeed, in this instance he seems to be misreporting, even if it is not deliberate because of his insanity. Regardless, the unreliability of his character is established very early in the story through the apparent discrepancies between what he says and what he does. As Robert Shulman argues, the narrator’s “profound irrationality and progressive revelation of basic anxiety, terror, and dread” (159) give us every reason to question his reliability, and, I would add, sanity.

Questioning the narrator’s reliability can actually be productive in that it potentially initiates an empathic response towards his character. In an attempt to unravel the narrator’s irrational behavior, readers are coerced into taking his

perspective. For example, when the narrator claims that he had no rational motive for murder, other than the old man's eye, readers are likely to be suspicious and look for alternative explanations for his behavior. In "The Cask of Amontillado" there is a clear motive; even though the extent of Montresor's injuries is unknown readers understand that he was repeatedly insulted. In this story, the motive appears to be unconscious and driven by the narrator's troubled psychological state. Still, attempting to empathize with the narrator is complex because he seems dangerously out of sync not only with reality, but with the gravity of the consequences of his actions. Yang recognizes the difficulties inherent in taking this particular narrator's perspective, but also argues that this type of mental simulation "offers a concept more intriguing than just the obvious, surface motive as it delv[es] into the criminal's mind, teasing out the underlying driving force for murder, even if the criminal was not actively aware of it at the time" (597). While the narrator insists it was the old man's "vulture eye," the reader intuitively suspects there is some other unconscious motive behind his erratic behavior because his explanation defies reason, but also because he has proven himself to be unreliable. Phelan points out that "once any unreliability is detected all the narration is suspect" (qtd. in Zunshine 79). Therefore, the narrator's consistent unreliable narration makes his suggested motive feels slippery, to say the least, because of his earlier irrational claims. Consequently, if readers are convinced of the narrator's unreliability they will be forced to "reject the narrator's words and reconstruct an alternative" motive (Zunshine 79), which in this case appears to be unconscious. One primary indicator that the motive is likely unconscious is the narrator's uncertainty regarding his own intentions. For example, when he says "I

think it was his eye!” (138), he is suggesting that he himself is not entirely sure of the reason behind his irrational hatred.

The point is, the unreliability of the narrator calls into question his motive, which opens the door for speculation regarding his behavior. Certainly, as both Booth and Abbott have argued, “in order to interpret a narrative, we must have as fine a sense as we can of where a narrator fits on [the] broad spectrum of reliability” (Abbott 76). The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is particularly unreliable because he is mentally compromised, which makes both his reporting and interpretation of events questionable. Indeed, his account is self-conscious to the extent that he judges the old man based on his own afflictions and not the truth, a misjudgment that Magdalen Wing-chi Ki points out “can only mirror the ‘blindness’ of the self, signifying a lack of insight” (25). The narrator does not see, or refuses to see, his insanity, which is what fuels his ardent, irrational hatred for the old man. While he never indicates an alternative cause for his hatred, his own uncertainty, as well as the irrationality of his motive, suggest another underlying cause for his behavior. The narrator’s focalization is revealing: it shows that his perspective is skewed and weakens his ability to accurately assess the thoughts and behaviors of those around him because he is so focused on his own actions, which causes him to lose sight of any sense of propriety and rationality.

As the narrative progresses, the continued inconsistencies in the narrator’s behavior, such as how he uses his ToM to interpret the old man and the police, support suspicions of insanity. He observes the old man in his sleep for hours seven nights in a row. Finally, on the eighth night of observation, the old man

abruptly sits up and cries, “Who’s there?” (139). Follows his cry is a description of what the narrator *thinks* the old man is feeling. As the narrator stands out in the hall he listens and describes what he claims he *knows* the old man is thinking and feeling. He says, “I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart” (204). It is worth noticing, however, that the narrator, from his position outside the door in the darkness, has a limited view of the old man. Even still, he confidently assumes that the old man is lying awake in terror:

I knew he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise,
when he had turned in his bed. His fears had been ever since
growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless,
but could not . . . Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with
suppositions; but he had found all in vain. . . It was the mournful
influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—
although he neither saw nor heard—to feel the presence of my
head within the room. (204)

However, while the narrator fantasizes about the fears of the old man, it could just as easily be true that he had comfortably drifted back to sleep. The narrator has said, after all, that he had given him no reason to suspect his evil intentions. This particular passage reveals how the narrator’s frequent misinterpretations become symptomatic of his deficient ToM. The narrator makes assumptions regarding what the old man is feeling based on what he wants him to feel. He is unable to distinguish his fantasies from reality, making his ToM increasingly less accurate as the story progresses.

The narrator's dysfunctional ToM is a symptom of his insanity, which erupts in full force when the police arrive to question him at the end of the story. Throughout the narrative, his character has remained consistently inconsistent, which, if we are truly convinced of his insanity, likely causes us to feel anxiety when the policemen begin to question him. As the narrator becomes more and more agitated it becomes apparent he is unlikely to be able to keep his secret. He says, "I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached and I fancied a ringing in my ears" (206). There is certainly suspense at this point in the narrative because of the narrator's earlier excited and erratic behavior, which cause suspicion that he will be unable to control his emotional responses. The focalization at this point in the narrative is particularly effective, resulting in dramatic irony as we are able to hear the narrator's commentary not only on what he is thinking and feeling, but also his interpretation of what he believes the police are thinking; and, because of his unreliability, it seems likely that he is misinterpreting their behavior. Initially, the narrator assumes that the police believe he is innocent. He says that the officers were satisfied, that his "manner had convinced them" (205). This is difficult to believe, however, because of how he describes his own behavior. He talks in a heightened voice, argues about trifles with violent gesticulations, foams, raves, swears, and grates upon the floor boards (205). All this, he says, while "the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled" (205). By the end of the story, the narrator's behavior, his misinterpretations and irrational, bizarre actions, have made it challenging to empathize with his character. In fact, it has become extremely

difficult to take his perspective because he has completely succumbed to insanity—he has lost his foothold with reality.

The difference in how the narrators of “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are characterized is likely to cause readers to have differing judgements regarding their characters. In both stories the narrators commit murder and unabashedly recount their actions, but we are likely to argue that Montresor’s character, of the two, has the higher level of cognizance. Montresor has a better functioning ToM, which is evident in his ability to accurately interpret the behavior of Fortunato, but he is also level-headed and diabolical in his plans to murder Fortunato. Montresor’s character would potentially function well in social situations, which we can infer because of the way he successfully manipulates Fortunato. He is able to predict the responses of Fortunato in their dialogue, and is able to conceal his own feelings of hatred, at least long enough to carry out his well laid plan. Recent studies of ToM have reported that “accurate understanding of [others] beliefs, emotions, intentions, and desires allows for the prediction of future mental states, associated actions, and engagement in appropriate social behavior” (Coulsen, Hooker, Lincoln, and Dodell-Feter 1). This study suggests that a person who can successfully read the behavior of others will also be successful in predicting the responses of others in social situations. Montresor’s entire plan was reliant on Fortunato’s anticipated reaction to his invitation to sample the Amontillado. His character, however, is intriguing because of the story’s focalization which reveals a detailed account of his psychological manipulation of Fortunato. Vermeule posits that we are intrigued by characters who use their powers for evil, claiming “they have a superhuman

capacity to exploit people” (53). Truly, Montresor’s plans are executed with unbelievable precision; he was never caught because of his meticulous premeditation. The calculated nature of Montresor’s plan, as well as his calloused ability to exploit Fortunato, indicates that he was sane when he committed the crime and sane when he confessed the act fifty years later.

The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” on the other hand, is insane. Indeed, his behavior reaches unquestioningly beyond the scope of normalcy. His irrational hatred of the old man’s eye, his claim to hear things that obviously aren’t real, his marked inability to accurately interpret the behavior of others, and his irrational and frenzied thoughts not only prove his ToM is deficient, but also confirm his obvious lack of rationality. Interestingly, both narrators’ ToM capabilities are distinguishing elements of their characterizations, exposed through their first-person focalizations. The differences in the way that both narrators are characterized through their thoughts and behaviors betrays one as insane while the other is mentally sound, although they both are curiously provocative because of their candid thoughts and evil behavior. The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” however, seems to have less control over his thoughts and actions. This is where the empathic responses experienced for the two narrators are likely to diverge. For instance, because Montresor’s crime is so premeditated, he seems more accountable for his actions where the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is perhaps less in control of his menacing impulses. This isn’t to say that either murder is justified; it just means that readers are likely to respond differently to their behaviors. Focalization, in both stories, is the structural element that gives readers the capability to make judgments regarding both

narrators' motives and intentions as it gives a prolonged view into the interiority of their characters. Consequently, the first-person focalization in "The Tell-Tale Heart" exposes the narrator's insanity just as it reveals the manipulative nature of Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado."

As previously mentioned, the empathic response we have towards our unnamed narrator is intimately related to how he is characterized, but perhaps more importantly, the first-person focalization ensures that readers at least attempt to take his perspective in order to make sense of his story. The intense focalization of the narrator gives readers a prolonged, even if disturbing, view into what he is thinking and feeling about his murder of the old man. In this situation, readers are likely to experience the form of empathy Batson describes as "knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings" (4). The focalization in the narrative indeed gives us direct exposure to his mental state, and by using ToM we can make conjectures about what he is thinking and feeling, even if it is uncomfortable and provokes negative emotions such as fear and repulsion. While we were able to use the question of motive to project ourselves into the narrative situation of "The Cask of Amontillado," the absence of motive in "The Tell-Tale Heart," as well as the insanity of the narrator, invokes a different form of empathy that is focused on sorting through his sporadic, fragmented thoughts to understand why he was provoked to murder a person he claims he loved. The emotional responses felt for both narrators is contingent on how readers evaluate those characters' accountability, which means that readers are likely to experience less empathy for Montresor because of his deliberate and malicious intentions.

It is also important to consider the empathic responses the narrative form of “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” encourage us to have towards the stories’ victims: Fortunato and the nameless old man. Not surprisingly, the focalization and characterization of the two victims influences our ability to empathize with them. In the “Tell-Tale Heart,” the type of empathic response invoked for the old man is likely to be empathic distress, which is described by Batson as “distress evoked by witnessing another’s distress [resulting] in feelings of anxiety and unease” (7). The focalization of the narrative directs our attention toward the narrator. We are given no personal details regarding the old man except that he is old and has a “vulture eye.” In fact, we aren’t even told his name. However, the imagined horror of his situation can result in feelings of anxiety and unease for his character. Because of the distance that the point-of-view and lack of characterization creates between the reader and the old man, the empathic response experienced for him is likely to be remote. This distance between the reader and the victim, however, need not negate the distress felt for the old man as it is by all means possible to feel concern for characters who are not given extensive exposure throughout a narrative, although it might diminish the potency of the distress experienced by readers’ for the old man because of the little information they are given regarding his character.

Similarly, the way that Fortunato is characterized, through the exclusive focalization of Montresor, heavily influences the empathic response readers may have towards his character. Unlike the old man, the narrative does provide us with aspects of Fortunato’s character, albeit through the biased perspective of Montresor. We are told that Fortunato was a man who deeply disrespected

Montresor, and preformed insults that inspired malicious vengeance. Fortunato is also prideful and arrogant, which is shown through his disdain for Luchesi and his insistence on being the expert to sample and determine the validity of the Amontillado. He says to Montresor, “Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry!” (281). Finally, Fortunato is depicted as a fool who is no match for the cunning of Montresor, especially when he is intoxicated. Truly, Fortunato is not characterized as an “honorable” victim; it is difficult to like him. Still, the precariousness of his situation, particularly because of his inebriated state, creates concern for his character. Fortunato is oblivious of the danger he is in, which likely causes feelings of empathic distress for him because, in spite of his pompous characterization, he is highly vulnerable. Vermeule explains this type of emotional response, where the reader is privy to knowledge that the characters in a narrative are not, in the following statement: “When a character is about to be ambushed, we feel fear for her. . . Narrative storytelling often depends on the reader’s awareness that there’s a difference between what the character experiences and what the reader herself knows” (42). In essence, because we know that Montresor intends to kill Fortunato, and that Fortunato doesn’t realize it, we are prone to experience the negative emotions of anxiety and/or distress for his precarious situation. Indeed, Montresor spends a great deal of energy depicting Fortunato as an arrogant fool, which is admittedly convincing, and likely included to discourage readers from feeling too much sympathy for the latter’s character, even as he is lured to his demise.

The empathic responses experienced when reading “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are highly dependent on both stories’

narrative structure. Literary critics have extensively researched both of these stories because of Poe's uncanny ability to expose the disturbing psychology of his narrators; and, because of this, much of the criticism on his work has been psychoanalytic. Shuman acknowledges that "the usual psychological study of Poe treats the fiction as an unconscious manifestation of the author's problems or as an unconscious confirmation of orthodox Freudian categories" (144). While psychoanalytic criticism has certainly produced important research in Poe studies, it tends to look at the psychological conditions of the narrators as symptoms of the various unconscious or subconscious conditions of their author. It seems to me, however, that both "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"—their intentional structure and subsequent effects—have the potential to expand our understanding of why Poe's stories evoke the empathic responses for which they are so famous. The reason that these particular stories are such fascinating studies for psychoanalytic criticism is precisely because of the focalization of the villainous narrators who require us to use our ToMs in order to make sense of their immoral behavior. A narrative analysis adds to the existing psychoanalytic criticism by delving deeper into how structural elements, such as focalization, create characters who invite yet resist empathic responses from readers. It is my contention that looking at the construction of Poe's stories through the lens of narrative theory can help differentiate him from his narrators by analyzing the distinctive structure of his texts to determine both how and why they provoke such powerful emotional responses, which is ultimately the reason his personal character has received so much attention, and even speculation, from large audiences for centuries. Ultimately, the careful characterizations of both

Montresor and the unnamed narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” as well as their first-person perspectives, are powerful instigators of empathic responses, even as they result in the uncomfortable feelings of fear and even repulsion. In other words, the narrative structure of both stories allows us to view the interiority of the narrators’ characters, which is provocative and disturbing, and absolutely a large part of why we read Poe’s fiction.

Chapter 3:

How Focalization and Narrative Distance Determine Empathy in

“The Fall of the House of Usher”

Gothic fiction is known for evoking terror through tropes that include supernatural phenomena, phantasms of death and destruction, and the mental disintegration of principal persona, all of which work to produce an ethereal, memorable effect upon readers. Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” is widely considered to be his most Gothic tale precisely because it contains these tropes as evidenced through the mysterious House of Usher, whose influence appears to have caused the psychological deterioration and even destruction of the ancient, dwindling race of Ushers. Poe, however, constructed this particular tale differently by adding his distinctive version of psychological trauma to the Gothic structure. His flavor of Gothic fiction diverges from the earlier writings of Horace Walpole, William Beckford, and Ann Radcliffe because, as Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero has argued, Poe realized that the form needed to be updated: “If the fantastic was to be believable, it had to offer a new nature, a new narrator, and a new setting” (Guerrero 71). This narrator plays a vastly different function than Montresor or the narrator of the “The Tell-Tale Heart.” In “The Fall of the House of Usher” the narrator is not a villain and is not confessing a crime. On the contrary, his perspective is that of an observer trying to solve the Gothic mystery that has drastically altered his childhood friend, Roderick Usher. Consequently, his perspective is crucial to readers’ understanding and acceptance of the Gothic setting. The narrator is the intermediary of Roderick Usher’s story, and therefore

it is through his perspective that readers are able to experience empathy for his character.

Experiencing narrative empathy while reading Gothic fiction is challenging because it frequently exceeds the boundaries of realism, creating a distance between the reader and the text. However, Poe's presentation of the Gothic in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is curiously realistic because the focus of terror is psychological, meaning that the reality of events is less important than how the narrator perceives them. As Guerrero states, "one of Poe's great achievements is to have made the fantastic part of common life" (71), which he does in this particular story through focalization. Throughout the story the narrator is the focalizer, or the eyes through which the events in the narrative are perceived. The focalization is particularly significant in this story because the narrator's first-person perspective makes it apparent that he understands just as little, and sometimes less, about the curious events of the decaying House of Usher than readers do, although he continually validates their reality and influence on his person through his emotional responses to the events as they unfold throughout the course of the narrative. Indeed, the effects of the House of Usher are manifested psychologically. As Guerrero-Strachan notes, it is "the mental derangement that the narrator experiences under Roderick's influence [that] provokes the fantastic" (71). The narrator, initially skeptical of Roderick's dramatically altered character, by degrees finds the Gothic influence "creeping upon me . . . [Roderick's] own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (185). The fantastic or supernatural influences on Roderick's character are intimately felt and experienced by the narrator who, in a more lucid manner than his host, is able to

describe their gradual impression on his psyche; he is “overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror” which is “unaccountable yet unendurable” (186). At length, the psychological deterioration induced by the mysterious House of Usher causes Roderick to succumb entirely to madness resulting in his subsequent death and destruction, validating Poe’s conception of the Gothic that according to Allan Lloyd-Smith presses fervently “toward an explanation and understanding of Gothic events through mental disorder” (33). Ultimately, because the story focuses on the psychological effects of the Gothic, readers are likely to be less concerned with the realism of the Gothic setting than with how it is infecting the story’s inhabitants.

The Gothic setting certainly influences Roderick the most, although the descriptions of his condition, what he is thinking and feeling, are reported by the narrator. Importantly, this mediation increases the distance between readers and Roderick’s character. Narrative distance is described by H. Porter Abbott as “the narrator’s degree of involvement in the story he tells” (74). Certainly, if the story was focalized from Roderick’s perspective, the distance between readers and his character would be much closer because they would have a more intimate view of the interiority of his character; they would be able to hear directly how the Gothic surroundings are affecting his thoughts and actions, and they would likely be able to assess his intentions toward the narrator and Lady Madeline. This knowledge, however, would eliminate the suspense that is prevalent throughout the narrative, which is created by the mysterious degeneration of Roderick’s character that perplexes the narrator throughout the entire rising action of the story. The narrator’s degree of involvement in this story is that of a friend, invested in

boosting the morale and alleviating the mysterious malady of his childhood companion. He has traveled from “a distant part of the country” in response to a letter from Roderick, a summons he responded to with haste (177). Upon his arrival the narrator describes in great detail the Gothic surroundings that he claims have altered Roderick’s character almost beyond recognition: “Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher!” (179). The narrator’s distance, his function as a mediator between the reader and Roderick, supplies readers with his subjective knowledge regarding the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the story’s protagonist. This is the narrator’s defined role throughout the story, which plays an important function and largely determines readers’ assessments of Roderick’s behavior. From the time of his arrival at The House of Usher, the narrator’s reporting of events—the increasing mental instability of Roderick, the death of his sister Madeline, her unsuccessful entombment, and her resurrection and the final collapse of the House of Usher—are told with naïve simplicity that causes the reader to be far more wary of Roderick and his intentions than the narrator is. The focalization in this narrative is crucial to readers’ abilities to empathize, to take the psychological perspective of Roderick in order to understand what he is feeling because of readers’ limited access to his thoughts and emotions, which are mediated and consequently colored by the external perspective of the narrator.

There are specific narrative elements in “The Fall of the House of Usher” that determine the type of empathic response readers are likely to have towards the characters, and it is my contention that narrative distance, the construction of the storyworld, and focalization are utilized throughout the text to encourage us to

empathize more with the narrator than with Roderick, although it is certainly possible to feel empathic concern for the latter's pathetic disintegration. Rooted in an updated version of the Gothic, "The Fall of the House of Usher" requires readers to use their mind reading skills to unravel the mysterious plot in tandem with the narrator. The story is written as a mystery, which, according to Lisa Zunshine, allows us "to experience the emotional thrill of danger, of chase, or relief, and then, perhaps, of a renewed danger all the while remaining safe" (122). The narrative structure of "The Fall of the House of Usher" allows readers to take the perspective of the narrator, to solve with him the mystery of Roderick's rapidly declining mental state, presumably from a comfortable distance. However, the rather obtuse characterization of the narrator makes it difficult to be at ease because his descriptions of Roderick and his behavior alert readers to the precariousness of his situation, even if he himself is not aware of it. For example, the first words Roderick says to the narrator convey his haunted, psychologically unstable state of existence:

I shall perish . . . I must perish in this deplorable folly. . . I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.
(180)

Roderick is obviously agitated, afraid of his own lack of reason, and even predicts the demise of his character. Still, the narrator dismisses his behavior as "superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted" (180).

The narrator's inability to discern the dangerous nature of Roderick's malady likely causes readers to feel empathic distress for his character. Indeed, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that the narrator is less concerned about Roderick's deterioration than he is with the seemingly supernatural influences of the House. Consequently, while readers might feel empathic distress for Roderick's pathetic condition they are limited in taking his perspective not only because of the narrative distance, but also because he poses a threat to the narrator who is in danger of becoming another victim of the supernatural influence that pervades the Gothic storyworld of Usher.

The construction of the mysterious storyworld in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is undoubtedly a crucial element in the narrative, as it establishes the pervasively gloomy atmosphere which proves to be infectious throughout the story. Perhaps this is why Poe spends the entire first two pages carefully describing the narrator's first impressions of the decaying House of Usher. The story opens with the narrator approaching the melancholy house on "the whole of a dark, dull, and soundless day . . . when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens" (176). This initial, dismal description immediately establishes a foreboding atmosphere, which is then followed by the narrator's admission that "with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit" (176). The narrator importantly acknowledges not only what he sees, but how it makes him feel, establishing the reality of the potent Gothic influence and its ability to pervade and oppress the soul. This is significant because it is exclusively through his perception and understanding of the fictional world that readers are able to realize the importance of the Gothic setting that functions

much like a character throughout the story. Alan Palmer convincingly argues that the “main channels by which the reader accesses fictional worlds, and the most important sets of instructions that allow the reader to reconstruct the fictional world, are those that govern the reader’s understanding of the workings of characters’ minds” (34). And indeed, as readers come to understand the narrator they are likely to see why the darkness that infects and threatens to destroy Roderick is so dangerous; even the narrator who suffers from no mental afflictions upon his arrival immediately begins to suffer from the pervasive gloom and darkness exuding from the House of Usher. In short, there is a tight connection between the narrator’s perception of the storyworld and how we perceive the dark and repressive atmosphere that surrounds the House of Usher.

Consequently, the Gothic storyworld as described (and defined) by the narrator begins the process of empathic connection with his character. The narrator’s reflections of the house, for example, are not just descriptions; they are an invitation to take his perspective because his understanding of the storyworld is tightly linked to his own personal impressions and feelings. He says: “I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak wall—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul. . . . There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” (176). The darkness so characteristic of the Gothic literally invades the psychology of the narrator, producing within him what Guerrero calls “a terror of the soul” (71). The storyworld is perceived by the narrator as strange and ominous, but most importantly he ascribes to the House of Usher human characteristics. He

personifies and gives life to the Gothic scenery he sees before him, such as when he describes the exterior of the house as having “vacant, eye-like windows” (177). This particular description attributes living characteristics to the Gothic mansion, and invites readers to see and imaginatively experience the House of Usher as he does, which initiates an empathic connection with his character. Amy Caplan explains that when we empathize with another, “[we] imaginatively experience his or her emotional states, while simultaneously imaginatively experiencing his or her cognitive states” (144). Therefore, as readers imagine the dark, foreboding scene described by the narrator, they can also imagine the repressive gloom he describes as “an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime” (176). The narrator’s immediate emotional response to the gloomy disposition of the House of Usher is significant as it establishes the story’s tone, and helps readers to make sense of the fantastical storyworld he is describing.

The psychological exposure of the narrator through his emotional responses to the Gothic setting described in the opening scene is an excellent example of Poe’s modification of the Gothic. Of this particular contribution to the Gothic genre Clark Griffith explains that Poe shifts “the focus of the terrifying from the spectacle to the spectator” (qtd. in Fisher 1). Indeed, Poe’s story effectively shifts the focus from the Gothic setting, the House of Usher, to how it influences and even threatens the psychological stability of its inhabitants. Guerrero adeptly explains that the psychological dimension in “The Fall of the House of Usher” was intended to shift the shape of the Gothic narrative so that “real events are not as important as the manner in which the narrator perceives

them” (71). Poe’s brand of Gothicism has two major functions relevant to my narrative empathy argument: first, by taking the perspective of the narrator we experience empathy for his character by imagining the storyworld from his point of view; and second, through that imaginative simulation we establish our own foothold in the strange world of the Gothic, which is all the more realistic because of the narrator’s own hesitations about its reality.

The psychological component Poe adds to the Gothic narrative structure increases readers’ abilities to experience narrative empathy because it facilitates a scenario in which we are able to take the perspective of a character. In earlier Gothic fiction, such as *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, the story is told from an omniscient narrator’s point of view. This type of external focalization is defined by Monika Fludernik as “zero focalization,” which occurs when the “narrator is above the world of action, looks down on it, and is able to see into the characters’ minds as well as shifting between the various locations where the story takes place” (38). In *The Castle of Otranto* the narrator’s perspective is unlimited, which makes empathizing with any single character difficult because there is limited exposure into the interiority of their minds; because we are told directly what the characters are thinking and feeling there is no need to use ToM capabilities to understand them. In “The Fall of the House of Usher” the story is internally focalized from the perspective of one of the story’s protagonists who in many ways represents the outside reader who is also trying to decode Roderick’s cryptic clues. Coplan’s work on empathy has shown that “readers tend to adopt a position within the spatio-temporal framework of narratives that is based on the position of the protagonist” (141). Therefore, Poe’s psychological adaptation to

Gothic fiction as shown in “The Fall of the House of Usher” increases the ability readers have to empathize with the story’s characters, particularly the protagonist, because of its focalization which literally requires adopting the narrator’s perspective in order to make sense of the story’s fictional world and accompanying mysteries, because the only method of decoding we have access to is through his consciousness.

The psychological exposure of characters’ consciousness was not the only structural element incorporated by Poe that diverged from the traditional Gothic form used by Walpole; there were also significant differences in their storyworlds. Benjamin Fisher states that “Poe’s centering of terrors in the minds of his protagonists rather than in the eerie corridors of haunted castles or in unquiet spirits clanking chains carries his work far beyond the Gothic of his eighteenth-century predecessors” (1). Poe’s contributions to the Gothic genre are indeed significant because they show the intimate connection between character and setting, structural narrative elements that are highly capable of producing emotional responses within readers. The relationship between the storyworld and its characters is always intimate because, as Palmer argues, “the fictional world cannot be understood except from the point of view of the characters” (145). The language and descriptions conveyed by the narrator are Gothic, which constructs in readers’ imaginations all of the formidable darkness that surrounds the House of Usher. Consider the following description given by the narrator upon his approach to the haunted House of Usher: “I reined in my horse to the precipitous bank of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the

inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant eye-like windows” (176-77). The motif of darkness is expressed in the adjectives gray and black, and the strangeness of the dwelling is described in the lurid tarn and in the images of the gray sedge, ghastly tree-stems and vacant and eye-like windows; we learn that the scene produces feelings of mystery and fear through his shudders, and he is also thrilled by the ominous scene before him. Importantly, the narrator’s description of the Gothic storyworld, and how it influences his mood and emotions, is a pervasive theme throughout the narrative. However, he feels yet fails to understand that the supernatural influence of the House is what is crippling and destroying Roderick. The narrator’s blindness is perhaps what prevents him from saving Roderick, although his persistence in trying to save him feels sincere. In other words, the narrator’s perspective exposes his limitations. We learn much about the Gothic storyworld and its influences by empathizing with the narrator, which is, as Palmer explains, “to enter into his personality to imaginatively share his experience (138).

The narrator’s degree of involvement in the story he is telling narrows the narrative distance between the reader and the storyworld. In *The Castle of Otranto*, the narrative distance is much greater than it is in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” By contrast, the tight focalization in Poe’s story increases the probability that readers will experience empathy while reading his text. Abbott explains the connection between focalization and emotional response particularly well:

[F]ocalizing can contribute richly to how we think and feel as we read. Just as we pick up on various intensities of thought and

feeling from the voice that we hear, so also do we pick up thought and feeling from the eyes we see through. And just as the voice we hear can be either a character in the narrative or a narrator positioned outside of it, so also our focalizer can be a character within the narrative or without. (74)

The omniscient eyes we see through in *The Castle of Otranto* are less discerning and focused because of their high vantage point which limits the exposure that is given to the interiority of the characters' minds. In other words, the broad focalization makes it difficult to establish an empathic connection with any particular character. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," I have argued that we are able to empathize with the narrator because of the story's focalization. However, as a character positioned within the narrative, we are also limited somewhat by his perspective.

Indeed, there are times when the narrator seems to lack the ability to discern the precariousness of his own situation. As John Timmerman observes, the reader of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is "far more deductive than the narrator but has to wait for him to reach the extreme limit of safety before fleeing" (228). Similarly, Susan Amper says that "Poe's tales present the narrators' accounts, but in a way that allows the reader to see much more—including the failure of the narrator to see" (44). It is true that the reader is likely to see the danger of the narrator's situation far more clearly than he does. For example, shortly after the narrator's arrival he is informed that the Lady Madeline, Roderick's beloved sister, possesses a mysterious disease that "had long baffled the skill of her physicians;" a malady which ultimately causes her

dissolution. Several days later Roderick “abruptly informs” the narrator that the Lady Madeline is no more, and that he wishes to “preserve her corpse for a fortnight . . . in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building” (184). The abruptness and abnormality of Roderick’s request to essentially hide his sister’s corpse is sufficient to raise readers’ suspicions regarding his intentions and probable involvement in her mysterious death. The narrator, however, says that he had “no desire to oppose what [he] regarded as at best a harmless, and by no means unnatural, precaution” (184). The narrator’s assessment of Roderick’s request is likely to be vastly different from readers’; indeed, his lack of suspicion calls into question his ability to accurately discern Roderick’s behavior.

Importantly, the mental dullness of the narrator is functional, as the narrowness of his focalization increases suspense and invites empathy even if we feel that Roderick is being overtly manipulative by soliciting the help of the narrator to hide the remains of Lady Madeline. At this point in the narrative it is probable that readers are empathizing more with the narrator than with Roderick because of the obvious precariousness of his situation, and perhaps more importantly because of his inability to see it. It is significant, however, that the feelings of distress or even repulsion for Roderick’s behavior are in fact evidence that readers are empathizing with him because of the precariousness of his situation and the suspense it creates within the narrative, although these feelings are perhaps experienced with less intensity on his behalf than they are for the narrator. The negative feelings of fear, disgust, or even horror are indicative that we are involved in an empathic simulation which, according to Caplan, allows readers to “experience emotions that are qualitatively the same as those of the target . . .

without losing the ability to simultaneously experience his or her own separate thoughts, emotions, and desires” (144). The emotions invoked through empathy are complex, and the narrator’s apparent blindness to the story’s moral disorder not only causes us to feel for him, it also potentially invokes empathic distress for the pathetic, disintegrating figure of Roderick Usher who is perceived, at least by the narrator, to be primarily a victim of his circumstances.

Roderick Usher is a perplexing character because he exists within the Gothic interpretations of the narrator who is unable to decipher his incredible condition; his fictional identity is constructed through the language and perceptions of the narrator. The manifestations of his behaviors, and his peculiar connection with the House of Usher make his character mysterious, and we are tasked with piecing together the clues given to us by the narrator of Roderick’s character in order to identify the supernatural powers of the Gothic mansion and how they are infecting and corroding its inhabitants. The narrator experiences the pervasive influence of decay inflicted by the house as evidenced when he states:

I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. (177-78)

The supernatural influence of the house has had a profound influence on the character of Roderick. The narrator describes the Roderick he knew in his youth

as having “an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model . . . a finely molded chin . . . [and] hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity” (179). The narrator describes Roderick as a character not easily to be forgotten because of his bright and striking features. He contrasts this memory, however, with the Roderick he now sees standing before him:

The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity. (179)

The unearthly description of Roderick’s appearance, particularly in contrast with the narrator’s earlier recollections, lends credence to his suspicions regarding the corrosive Gothic influence of the mysteriously haunted mansion. From the perspective of the narrator, Roderick is progressively becoming a product of his environment, which is why he has tasked the narrator with unraveling the mysteries of his impending doom, leaving a narrative gap that like the fissure on the House ominously widens as the story progresses.

It is the narrative distance between the reader and Roderick, and the narrator and Roderick that creates suspense and determines the degree to which we are able to empathize with his character. In actuality, we are only able to empathize with Roderick to the degree that the narrator does, because it is through empathizing with the narrator that readers are able to comprehend the strange

nature and illness of his character. In other words, the narrator continually endeavors to take the perspective of Roderick in order to understand his condition and behavior in order to help him, and readers, because of the story's tight focalization, vicariously empathize with Roderick through the narrator. Of course, this does not mean that readers will necessarily empathize with Roderick's character, only that they are invited to do so through the narrator's focalization. Readers do know, however, through the mediation of the narrator, that "Roderick thinks that the nature surrounding the house influences the building and exerts its influence upon its inhabitants" (Guerrero 71). Readers understand this from how the narrator is using his ToM to make sense of Roderick's dramatic metamorphosis, even if from time to time his interpretations of Roderick's behavior seem overly generous; as previously mentioned, readers are likely to perceive the danger the narrator is in far before he does. Roderick's behavior, particularly in the final scene that concludes with the collapse of the House of Usher and the demise of all its inhabitants, is highly indicative of his dangerous psychological condition. Roderick appears in the sleeping chamber of the narrator, his countenance "cadaverously wan . . . [with] a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained *hysteria* in his whole demeanor" (186). The narrator takes pity on him, and attempts to read to him to pass away the night hours, in spite of Roderick's excessive nervousness that gives the reader, and should give the narrator, every reason to be uneasy. The narrator describes how Roderick "rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway . . . his lips trembling as if he were murmuring inaudibly . . . a sickly smile quivering about his lips" (188). Yet still the narrator places his hand on his friend's shoulder

in an attempt to comfort him. The narrator, while admittedly afraid, is clearly unable to discern the acute danger of his situation, which is ultimately effective in producing sympathy, or empathic distress, for him. Blakey Vermeule explains this particular type of emotional response when she states that “the reckless wholeheartedness of heroes and heroines, their guileless vulnerability, solicits our affectionate concern and thereby activates our skepticism on their behalf” (8). The narrator’s failure to see likely causes readers to feel concern and even skepticism regarding Roderick’s behavior on his behalf. The narrator has every reason to be skeptical of Roderick’s behavior, and indeed seems to remain without guile and vulnerable until the last possible moment when he narrowly escapes, just in time to see the tarn close “sullenly and silently over the fragments of ‘The House of Usher’” (189).

Ultimately, while experiencing empathy for Roderick is challenging because of his behavior, it is possible because of the narrator’s sympathetic perspective towards his character. The narrator perceives Roderick as a victim, which is continually communicated through comparisons of the younger Roderick to the pitiful figure now standing before him. This does not mean that readers’ empathic responses toward Roderick are necessarily the same as those of the narrator. Certainly, the narrator’s earlier friendship to Roderick enhances his empathic response and heightens it to sympathy, a reaction which is “engaged by concern for the other . . . [and] motivates [him] to help the other” (Coplan 146). However, while the narrator’s empathy towards Roderick results in sympathy, ours likely does not. Structurally, Roderick is a villain who, regardless of his increasing insanity, buries his sister alive. Empathic responses towards Roderick,

particularly in the end, are likely to result in feelings of fear and repulsion. Keen reminds us, however, that we can indeed feel empathic distress for reprehensible characters. A frequent requirement of fiction, she argues, is that we “bond temporarily with monsters, madmen, and villains . . . from whom we might ordinarily recoil in horror” (131). In other words, empathizing with Roderick Usher does not mean we have to like him or condone his bizarre behavior; it means we have to enter his fictional consciousness at least briefly in order to unravel the mysteries of the narrative—experiencing empathy for Roderick leads readers toward a sense of closure as his demise ultimately resolves the story’s conflict and solves the mystery of the House.

Luckily, the narrator escapes the collapse of the House of Usher, and is able to fill in the narrative gaps before he is destroyed along with “the last of the ancient race of the Ushers” (180). The narrator’s inability to accurately read the true character of Roderick has brought into question his reliability, and has been a point of debate among critics such as Patrick F. Quinn and G.R. Thompson; because of the narrator’s admitted susceptibility to the influences of both Roderick and the House, the degree of his own sanity has been questioned. This narrator, however, serves a different function within the structure of the narrative that requires his lucidity and reliability. The narrators in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado” are clearly unreliable: Montresor is lucid but manipulative, and the other narrator clearly betrays his insanity. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the narrator is used to create a distance between readers and Roderick in order to create a suspenseful tone. If the narrator is unreliable, then the entire structure of the plot unravels as we can no longer trust his narration.

Zunshine argues that unreliable narrators, particularly in detective fiction, “force the reader into a situation in which [the reader] becomes unsure of the relative truth-value . . . contained in such a narrative” (124). In “The Tell-Tale Heart” the narrator’s unreliability is the element that creates suspense because we realize that his insanity is what provokes him to murder the old man. Similarly, in “The Cask of Amontillado,” Montresor’s unreliability is important in establishing the question of motive that is woven throughout the story’s plot. The narrator in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” however, is reliable which is demonstrated through his lucid albeit naïve narration. Indeed, he gives no apparent reason for readers to suspect he has other motives than those he suggests. He is presented as a skeptical observer, which persuades us to accept the unrealistic conditions of the storyworld because he does, because we trust his observations are credible. Without the credibility of his observations the entire Gothic world becomes unbelievable, as does the curious condition of Roderick. The unreliability of the narrator would result in his becoming the subject of analysis, rather than Roderick, which would alter the entire structure of the story.

However, to say that the narrator is reliable does not mean that his observations are infallible. The extent to which the House infects him is unclear, although we can ascertain from his manner that the Gothic influence does not overtake his reason. Even as he admits that Roderick’s condition terrifies him, “creeping upon him by slow yet certain degrees” (185), he shakes his feelings off as “utterly causeless alarm” (185). There is never any indication that he succumbs to the supernatural influences to the extent that he loses his sanity. Toward the end of the story, the narrator finds himself “overcome with horror,” but is

fortunate enough to shake it off with a gasp and a struggle (185). Roderick, on the other hand, within the same timeframe of the narrative has become entirely infected and, consequently, has completely withdrawn into insanity. Indeed, he begins to shudder and speaks in a “low, hurried, and gibberish murmur” (188). The stark contrast between the behavior of the two characters makes the mental clarity of the narrator, however tenuous, clear. Gregory Jay argues that “the madness of the narrator would be his rationality in reading, his refusal to recognize the other inhabiting the text” (qtd. in Guerrero 77). The rational yet obtuse characterization of the narrator functions in the story to create suspense which would otherwise be absent had he come to the dark conclusions regarding the haunted House and the extent of its effect on Roderick earlier. The narrator is not unreliable; he is empathically connected to his friend, which disables him from condemning his character before the ghastly storm erases the existence of the House of Usher.

The narrator’s perspective is a crucial structural element that functions in the “The Fall of the House of Usher” to construct the Gothic storyworld by reporting the unnatural occurrence of events as an outsider who is unfamiliar and even uncomfortable with his supernatural surroundings. As an outsider, the narrator in many ways represents the reader who is also navigating through the strange narrative space. The characterization of the narrator invites readers to empathize with him, which is essential to their acceptance of the potentially unrealistic Gothic setting. Guerrero rightly states that “Poe creates a type of narrator who controls the narrative tightly by narrowing the point of view and focus” (74). The tight focalization throughout the story determines to a large

degree our ability to understand the Gothic storyworld and the mysterious character of Roderick, who we have the opportunity to empathize with through the mediation of the narrator. The narrative structure of “The Fall of the House of Usher” enables readers to understand Poe’s variation of the Gothic, which adds a psychological layer that invites readers to understand the supernatural setting and its influence on Roderick Usher. And further, by incorporating a narrator who seeks understanding of the Gothic world himself, Poe’s narrative challenges readers to enter the uncomfortable space of Roderick’s mind by unraveling his disturbed consciousness through the narrator who empathizes with him, demonstrating the inherent dangers of feeling with an unsavory, dangerous character.

Chapter 4:

Empathic Over Arousal and Perversity in “The Black Cat”

In the previous two chapters I have argued that experiencing empathy for Poe’s narrators is both possible and problematic, and is highly dependent on narrative structure. Point of view, focalization, and characterization are narrative elements that enable readers to take the perspective of various characters, which we have done in the case of several of Poe’s narrators in an attempt to understand why they committed their crimes. In this chapter, however, I argue that experiencing empathy for characters is not always possible, particularly when applied to those that radically diverge from many readers’ conceptions of morality, such as the narrator in Poe’s “The Black Cat.” As Suzanne Keen argues, “empathy does not always occur as a result of reading emotionally evocative works of fiction” (72). Poe’s “The Black Cat” is certainly an example of fiction intended to produce an intense emotional response because of its suspenseful and provocative nature. The narrator of the story explains in graphic detail how he mutilated his cat and murdered his wife, with his professed motive being the spirit of perversity, which is, according to the narrator in the “Imp of the Perverse,” the “overwhelming tendency to wrong for the wrong’s sake” (215). Consequently, there are several empathic roadblocks that potentially divert readers from experiencing empathy while reading the narrator’s disturbing confession, one prime candidate being his lack of rational motive extending beyond that of pure malice. Indeed, the narrator’s disturbing characterization and his relentless first-person focalization are structural elements that impede experiencing empathy for his character. Essentially, I will argue that the structure of “The Black Cat,” its

focus on the concept of perversity along with the narrator's intense psychopathic tendencies, such as his striking lack of empathy and remorse, make it probable that readers will experience an aversive emotional response that Keen terms "empathic over arousal," which makes experiencing empathy for him highly challenging because his behavior is disturbing to the point that readers may lose their desires to take his perspective—they may be pressed beyond their empathic limitations.

Empathic over arousal, according to Keen, is a response that "creates personal distress (self-oriented and aversive) causing a turning-away from the provocative other . . . [that] leads people to stop reading . . . or to disengage full attention by skipping and skimming (4-5). While there is no way to effectively determine a universal checklist of narrative characteristics that induce empathic over arousal, it is possible to look at the narrative structure of an individual work, such as "The Black Cat," to analyze how its structure, intentionally or unintentionally, makes an aversive emotional response, such as empathic over arousal, more probable. For example, this narrator exhibits what we might define as psychopathic tendencies, such as apathy and remorselessness, which makes taking his perspective uncomfortable. Interestingly, Robert D. Hare, a forensic researcher of psychopathy, developed a "Psychopathy Checklist," which he published in *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of Psychopaths Among Us*, that can be applied to the narrator in "The Black Cat." This particular narrator clearly fits the psychopathic profile—an argument I will address shortly. Even still, the narrator appeals to readers for sympathy, asking for "some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own" (207) to hear the details

of his case. Empathizing with the narrator, however, is highly complex because of the morally forbidden space his behavior occupies, regardless of his unabashed and even provocative telling. As the story unfolds, the narrator's actions become progressively more repellant, and his narration becomes increasingly unreliable. For example, the narrator brutally cuts the eye out of his pet cat, Pluto, with a pocket knife and blames it on the diabolical Imp of the Perverse, a demon that possessed him with fiendish malevolence and provoked him to violence; he evidences no feelings of remorse for what he refers to as a "damnable atrocity" (208), but rather refers to any emotions he feels regarding his guilt as "feeble and unequivocal . . . [his] soul remained untouched" (208). Significantly, all of the narrator's destructive relationships are attributed to perversity—a motive that is unlikely to hold much credence for anybody in terms of legal or moral responsibility, from the authorities who apprehend him to the readers who are challenged with making sense of his disturbing narrative.

Perversity, as a concept, is a common theme in Poe's narratives, and is extensively detailed in the "Imp of the Perverse" as an "innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something . . . a *mobile* without a *motive* . . . that through its promptings we act for the reason that we should not" (215). In this particular tale, perversity is given an agent, an Imp that renders the narrator a defenseless victim of its evil machinations. The narrator of the story blames the Imp of the Perverse for the murder of his nameless victim, claiming that "with certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible" (215). The "it" referred to by the narrator in this instance is the spirit of perversity that he describes as "the one unconquerable force which impels us to its prosecution . .

. the overwhelming tendency to do wrong for wrong's sake" (215). This primal tendency is tenuous in that it suggests there is little or no agency for the perpetrator of evil. It is presented as a rational justification for murder that corrupts and controls the narrator, portraying him as a victim, although his behavior strongly suggests otherwise.

Before we learn of the narrator's crime in "The Imp of the Perverse," we are given the rationale of perversity through an imaginative scenario placing us, along with him, on "the brink of a precipice" (216).

We peer into the abyss — we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness and dizziness and horror become merged in a cloud of unnamable feeling. By gradations, still more perceptible, this cloud assumes shape . . . It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height . . . And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, therefore, do we the more impetuously approach it . . . Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the Perverse.

(216)

It is significant to note that the narrator does not stand on this precipice alone; by using the pronoun we, the reader is implicated as co-conspirator, and is subject to the tangible spirit of perversity. Arthur A. Brown notes that in the beginning of this tale "we are 'here' with him, as a result of that 'paradoxical something' that can be neither named properly nor comprehended" (198). The "paradoxical

something” is, of course, perversity, and the narrator of Poe’s story claims to acknowledge its force while acknowledging at the same time he has no understanding of it; he is drawn toward evil although he doesn’t know why. He says himself that “no reason can be more unreasonable” (215), attempting to persuade readers of his lack of agency or control before recounting the deliberate nature of his carefully planned and executed murder. However, the narrator’s claim of irrational motive is betrayed by the rational organization of his crime, which indeed suggests a stronger and more rational motive than perversity.

The second section of the story provides an illustration of the powerful nature of perversity. The narrator, in a rather abrupt change of point of view, suddenly addresses the reader from a second person perspective: “I have said this much, that in some measure I may answer *your* question—that I may explain to *you* why I am here—that I may assign to *you* something that shall have at least the faint aspect of a cause for my wearing these fetters, and for my tenanting this cell of the condemned” (emphasis added 216). Up to this point, the reader is probably completely unaware that she even had a question; further, what does the narrator mean when he says he is *assigning* the reader a cause for his imprisonment? The term “assign” suggests that the narrator presents his cause, or motive, and readers are to unquestioningly accept it. The entire rising action to this point in the narrative is intended to persuade us that the Imp of the Perverse is a tangible, accountable figure that we should believe is responsible for the narrator’s actions. At the very least, the narrator is putting perversity forward as his motive for murder, although he has already stated that “it is, in fact, a *mobile* without a motive, a motive without a *motivirt*” (215). The narrator readily admits to the

reader that the spirit of perversity is characterized by its lack of rational motive. As James W. Gargano smartly perceived, “[t]his imp is explained, by a man, it must be remembered, who eschews explanation as a radical, motiveless, and irresistible impulse within the human soul” (“The Question of Poe’s Narrators” 181). In other words, Gargano suggests that the narrator’s professed motive, perversity, is suspect because of its irrationality.

The concept of perversity presents an obvious barrier for readers attempting to empathize with the narrator. Indeed, how are we to feel or take the perspective of a narrator whose only motive is entirely irrational? Certainly, “the devil made me do it” is a rather slippery motive even to the most imaginative readers. The long explanation of perversity (that takes up more than half of the narrative) feels manipulative and even unpersuasive as the narrator is unable to explain it himself. In other words, the concept of perversity, as extensively explained by the narrator, defies reason, which precludes it from being accepted on its own term. Further, before the narrator is willing to tell us the nature of his crime, he whole heartedly attempts to persuade us that he was overtaken by an impulse, a strong desire to do wrong *because* it was wrong. If we are to use our ToMs to understand the narrator’s behavior, as Zunshine suggests, we arrive nowhere unless we are able to somehow parse out a viable motive, whether it is insanity, as it is in “The Tell-Tale Heart”; or revenge, as it is in “The Cask of Amontillado.” It’s as Vermeule explains: in order to feel satisfied with fiction we need some kind of a reward—we need to receive a payback for adequately “paying attention.” Having our mind reading capacities stimulated is simply not enough (98). There is no real payback for listening to this narrator’s confession;

he is not remorseful, he does not offer a rational motive, and does not receive punishment within the scope of the narrative, any of which would at least help readers to feel some satisfaction or closure upon finishing his tale. In this situation, the lack of closure creates a barrier to empathizing with the narrator because he seems indifferent to the consequences of his crimes, which leaves the reader with little sense that justice has been served when his story has finished.

It should be acknowledged that in the “Imp of the Perverse” there is one sentence that does establish at least a hint of a viable motive: “Having inherited his estate, all went well with me for years” (217). The “he,” who is the victim in the story, is never defined. In fact, this is all we ever hear of him. However, this acknowledgment of the narrator is at least a morsel we can cling to when attempting to understand the veracity of the narrator’s tale, although it is never mentioned or even referred to again. Consequently, the absence of motive and first-person focalization in the second section of the narrative ensures that the focus remains exclusively on the narrator. In fact, the entirety of the illustration we receive of the narrator’s susceptibility to perverseness deals with his personal responses—his relationship with the mischievous imp: “It harassed because it haunted,” he says, and coerced him to murmur repeatedly, “I am safe—I am safe” (217). And safe he is, until the invisible fiend strikes him on the back, forcing “the long imprisoned secret” to burst from his soul (218). We are unlikely to believe that the narrator had little or even limited agency in committing his crime because he says himself that “it is impossible that any deed could have been wrought with a more thorough deliberation” (217). The narrator’s overt acknowledgement of premeditation makes his version of events highly unreliable because he has

already claimed that the Imp of the Perverse is spontaneous and impulsive, which contradicts his carefully calculated behavior.

Even still, perversity is also the defense used by the narrator of “The Black Cat,” a tale with similar structural elements to “The Imp of the Perverse.” Both anonymous narrators are giving their confessions of murder the day before their executions, presumably from their jail cells. Most importantly, both narrators use perversity as the justification for their crimes. The narrator in “The Black Cat,” however, is even more difficult to empathize with than the narrator in “The Imp of the Perverse” because there is no other logical motive that we can extract from his confession. Perhaps this is why much of the criticism on this particular narrative is focused on the unreliable, lying nature of the narrator. For example, Susan Amper, in her article “Untold Story: The Lying Narrator in ‘The Black Cat,’” briefly states the narrator’s unbelievable logic followed by a very direct statement: “Obviously, the man is lying” (475). James Gargano similarly argues that the events in the “The Black Cat” are inexplicable and “enforced by the narrator’s repeated assertions that he cannot understand his own story” (172). In other words, the inconsistencies between what the narrator says, and what he does, makes him a highly unreliable and untrustworthy narrator.

It is difficult to empathize with this narrator who cuts out the eye of his cat, hangs him from a tree, and brutally buries an axe in the head of his wife, yet tranquilly sleeps “even with the burden of murder upon [his] soul” (211-12). This narrator’s behavior is characteristically psychopathic as he is devoid of emotion, highly self-centered, and lacks empathy, which likely makes him repellant to many readers. Indeed, his psychopathic characterization and his intense

focalization are crucial narrative elements that heavily influence our ability to experience empathy for him while reading his story. It is my contention that this particular story has the potential to induce an over aroused empathic response because of our inability, or lack of desire, to take the narrator's unreliable perspective in an attempt to understand his behavior, which, like the murder in "The Imp of the Perverse," lacks an explicable motive.

The narrator in "The Black Cat" begins his story benignly, stating: "for the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief" (207). This calls into question why the narrator is so obsessed with telling his tale if, in fact, he is indifferent about his audiences' beliefs. The narrator's purpose, according to Richard Badenhause, is to portray himself and his behavior as normal "by suggesting that his murderous actions differed in no way from the normal, everyday occurrences of the domestic realm" (489). By portraying himself and his behavior as "homely," and claiming he is not soliciting belief, the narrator is issuing readers a challenge to take his perspective; he is asking for empathy. Even though the narrator claims he does not expect or solicit belief, he is persuasively attempting to present his case. In the very next paragraph he explains that he was docile and tender as a child, offering at least some sort of justification for his actions. However, as Vicki Hester and Emily Segir argue, "because the narrator insists on calling the murder an 'everyday' event, readers will likely distance themselves from him" (180). This need for distance is initiated because of the narrator's behavior, which challenges most readers' conceptions of morality. It is highly unlikely readers will believe his assertion that murder is a mere household event, as there is nothing ordinary or

mundane about mutilating his cat—cutting out his eye and hanging him from a tree— or killing his wife on an impulse by burying an axe in her brain. Further, as the narrator continues his petition he acknowledges that he doesn't truly believe his repulsive actions to be mundane: "Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common-place . . . which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (207). The narrator's petition to readers' logical intellects to interpret his psychopathic behavior as ordinary and/or natural is evidence of the faulty logic of perversity, and the fact that he claims his actions are mundane makes him all the more unreliable. After all, he seems to go to great lengths to convince readers that his crime is ordinary and has a rational explanation. However, the existing paradox between his claims and his behavior are more likely to convince the reader that his crimes were malicious and that he should be held accountable for them.

The narrator's reliability is significant because our ability to empathize with him is dependent on our ability to navigate successfully through his story. He is untrustworthy—deliberately deceptive, which Wayne Booth argues transforms the total effect of the work a narrator relays to us (158). It would certainly be easier to empathize with the narrator if we were able to use our ToMs to find some semblance of rationality in his behavior. His transparent manipulation, however, makes his entire narration suspect. Therefore, when the narrator appeals to our emotions, claiming that the consequences of his atrocities have "terrified . . . tortured . . . [and] destroyed" (207) him, it is not likely he will receive readers' sympathy. The remorseless nature of his character makes it difficult for readers to

believe his explanation of this behavior, which he claims was prompted by an impulsive imp or spirit of perversity that has ultimately destroyed him. Of the narrator's unreliability Joseph Stark rightfully claims that "when [the narrator] blames his crime on human depravity, we are skeptical of this solution, simply because he offers it" (256). If we are skeptical to the point of disbelief, it is possible that we are approaching empathic over arousal, which is characterized by feelings of distress invoked by "feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a reader's moral code" (Keen 134). The narrator's actions are violent and malevolent, and, to complicate matters, these feelings of distress are amplified by the nonexistence of a reasonable motive.

Throughout the entirety of the story, the narrator continually subverts our moral expectations by giving us hints of a motive, while telling us something else entirely. The narrative toggles back and forth between story time, the sections of the narrative focused on the retelling of the murder, and narrative time, intrusions in the story time that present moments of rationalization and/or justification. These breaks are structurally significant in that they offer possible glimpses of the narrator's motive. One such break immediately follows the introduction where the narrator states the following: "From my infancy I was noted from the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions" (207). Ed Piacentino explains that the narrator's commentary, while seemingly strange within the narrative context at first, functions as "a remembrance that bears a significant connection to the murder of his wife" (159). This remembrance is used by the narrator to explain how he came to procure his pets, namely his cat Pluto; they were given to him by

his wife who had observed his “partiality for domestic pets” (207). This particular moment of the story shifts from narrative time back into story time, and suggests a link between his past love of animals and his recent vicious behavior. His argument states that his earlier love for animals led to his wife procuring them for him, which finally led to his cat Pluto’s execution that resulted in his wife’s murder.

The difficulty with justifications such as these, given in story time, is that they are so contrary from the character he represents in narrative time.

Interestingly, the narrator’s logic when pieced together demonstrates his lack of reliability, and his subsequent inability to offer a logical justification for his behavior. The narrator’s implied claim that he was mistreated by his peers in his youth hardly seems a viable motive for his later manipulative and psychopathic behavior. The purpose, then, of narrative intrusions such as these is likely to appeal to the emotions of readers, to convince them he is not such a bad guy.

Piacentio says that the narrator deliberately structures his story, alternating between story time and narrative time in an “attempt to sway reader’s thinking and win his sympathy . . . the narrative sequences affording him the opportunity to voice and authorize his current judgements and rationalizations for his past actions” (158). However, the narrator’s hint at a motive is insufficient. While it may allude to psychological trauma he experienced, it in no way equates to a plausible motive that warrants readers’ sympathy. The narrator’s real intentions, regardless of his commentary, remain troublingly ambiguous because of the gaping discrepancies in his behavior. In narrative time the narrator suggests that his motive was perversity while in story time he suggests that he is responding to

childhood bullying. Interestingly, the rationale given in story time is significantly more logical than the later explanation offered in narrative time. Perversity, however, as a motive is slippery and ultimately deflates his credibility not only because it is irrational, but because it demonstrates one of the many inconsistencies abundant in his confession.

Perversity, as we know, is the narrator's acknowledged motive, the rationalization he offers for the cruel mistreatment of his cat, and for the brutal murder of his wife. However, as in the "Imp of the Perverse," this justification is highly problematic. In the following accounting, the narrator explains his weakness for perversity in what is, perhaps, the most defining moment of the story, which is when he for no apparent reason murders his cat, Pluto, in cold blood:

This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. (209)

The narrator makes a clear point of proudly telling us that the cat, Pluto, had done nothing to warrant his evil fury—he says he hung it because he knew it had loved him, because he felt it had given him no reason for offence, and because he knew he was committing a deadly sin (209). There are many ethical problems with the narrator's logic, but particularly troubling is his description of his own response to the deed: "One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;—hung it with tears streaming from my eyes, and with the

bitterest remorse at my heart” (209). The narrator’s actions, intermingled with his alleged emotional response, are highly capable of initiating profound empathic distress because his tears do not feel genuine. After all, why would he so callously murder his cat knowing it would cause him bitter remorse? The narrator’s malicious act towards his “favorite pet and playmate” (208) is unjustifiable, particularly because of the animal’s defenselessness. Consequently, when the narrator tells us he had tears streaming down his face we might have an aversive emotional response towards his reaction. In fact, his claim that perversity is to blame might make readers angry because his behavior is so repellant and, as previously mentioned, psychopathic.

It should be acknowledged that Poe’s characterization of the narrator as a psychopath *is* quite convincing, even if there was no legal definition for the condition in the early nineteenth-century: “That Poe understood and characterized the psychopath so clearly, including the narrator’s deceitfulness, lack of conscience, egocentricity, and manipulative behaviors supports the idea that Poe was more than a titillating, Gothic writer” (Hester and Segir 189). The narrator certainly embodies the characteristics of a psychopath, which he vividly demonstrates through his behavior towards his wife. He describes the murder of his wife as an impulsive reaction, induced by her interference with his intended annihilation of the cat. He states that he was “goaded by the interference” of his wife, which sent him into “a rage more than demoniacal” (211). In a reactionary moment, he withdraws his arm from her grasp and buries his axe in her brain. There is no indication, ever, that the narrator feels remorse for his actions. Ironically, throughout the narrative he has had nothing but kind things to say

about his wife; he describes her as uncomplaining, congenial—a patient sufferer, yet still he allows himself to use intemperate language towards her, and “offers her personal violence” (208). The word “offers” in conjunction with personal violence is curious, suggesting that he had given his wife agency in the matter. His detachment from his wife suggests a disturbing lack of empathy, making it extremely difficult for readers to empathize with him. As Magdalen Wing-Chi Ki argues, “when the narrator transfers his anger from the cat to his wife, he does not see that his behavior is monstrous or unusual, he simply sees the murder as a banal act” (581). Readers, on the other hand, are likely to view the narrator’s actions as anything other than banal, his emotionless descriptions creating a narrative distance between him and the reader.

Ultimately, if readers are looking for a rational motive throughout this disturbing confession, they are likely to be disappointed because there is none to be found. As readers attempt to use ToM to understand his behavior, or at least the motivations behind his behavior, they are likely to feel perplexed because his callous response to the murder of his wife and mutilation of his cat likely oppose most conceptions of morality. For example, when the narrator says that “it is impossible to describe or imagine the deep, the blissful sense of relief” he felt having accomplished the hideous murder (212) readers are likely to agree, but for reasons other than what the narrator suggests. At this point in the story it is probable that readers are unable to imagine the narrator’s perspective, either because they are truly unable to conceptualize how he could possibly feel relief after murdering his spouse, or because they have experienced an aversive emotional response that has minimized their desires to empathize with his

character, or perhaps even both. It is likely that readers are similarly shocked when he says that he slept tranquilly, even with “the burden of murder upon his soul” (212). Indeed, if we were to observe the narrator’s behavior, having no knowledge of his prior crimes, it is highly unlikely we would suspect him to be a murderer because his actions following the murder are not in accordance with what we would normally anticipate: he shows no sign of remorse, which is the logical expectation. Hester and Segir comment that “the narrator shows no moment of hesitation, regret, or contemplation . . . He does not call his wife’s death an accident but refers to the death as ‘the hideous murder accomplished.’ . . . The narrator shows no signs of empathy or remorse, no signs of anything that relates to concern other than for himself” (186). In other words, the narrator subverts most readers’ expectations by candidly admitting the positive emotional response he experienced following his wife’s murder. While we might expect the narrator to say that he felt anxiety or even sorrow, he admits he felt “relief,” which is frustrating to the reader who desires a sense of closure, or a desire to see that at least some degree of justice has been served.

The narrator is troublesome, not as much because of his behavior, but because his speech is so inconsistent with his actions. Alan Palmer makes the point that it is typical for bodies to “vigorously betray the secrets [they] are trying desperately to keep—by blushing, trembling, or sweating, to mention only the most obvious cases” (132). In the “Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator’s behavior, his erratic thoughts, speech, and hearing voices both in heaven and hell, betray his insanity. He refers to his heightened condition as a disease that has merely “sharpened his senses” (203). This narrator, however, remains “rational and aware

of what [he] is doing and why” (Hester and Segir 177). When the police arrive to search his cellar “he quivered not in a muscle. [His] heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence” (213). It is not difficult to see why the officers searched the narrator’s premises three or four times for some clue as to the disappearance of his wife (212). His calm and collected behavior must have been convincing. In fact, it is only the narrator’s arrogance, his frenzy of bravado that seals his fate, when he raps “heavily with a cane . . . upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom” (213). This self-indulgent act is what ironically unravels the crime, and represents the misguided trust he feels “in the power of his intellect to triumph over the superstitions which he feels are formulated in the moral code” (177). Ultimately, the narrator is weakest when he seems to be the most assured. His false assumptions ultimately expose his irrationality, the faulty confidence he professes to have in perversity and in his own ability to escape judgement for his crimes.

The narrator’s self-indulgence is effectively revealed through the story’s relentless first-person focalization. He is obsessed with the telling of his story, and throughout the text describes the events in terms of how they affect him personally. Ronald Bieganowski describes the narrator as “self-consuming,” because he focuses “attention less on what [he] would seem to point to and more on what happens to [him] as [he] attempts to express the ineffable” (175). The narrator exemplifies his egocentricity immediately following the murder of his wife when he expresses no emotional response to her death; instead, he immediately focuses on the problem of hiding her corpse: “She fell dead upon the spot without a groan. This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself, and with

entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body” (211). The narrator briefly mentions the death of his wife, but “directs more attention towards himself and his cat” (Hester and Segir 180). He speaks of the effort he expends towards finding a suitable place to hide his wife’s body, as if it is commendable, and when the deed is accomplished responds by saying that “here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain” (212). This selfishness of the narrator’s response to such a traumatic event is disturbing. His proudly demonstrated lack of remorse has the potential to inhibit experiencing empathy for his character because he has murdered his wife and seems so entirely unaffected by it.

The focalization in this narrative greatly influences our emotional responses because there is no reprieve from the narrator’s untrustworthy recounting. In all likelihood, readers are told more than they would like to know, which creates personal distress, a precursor to empathic over arousal. It is uncomfortable to hear so many disturbing details that all affirm the horrific nature of narrator’s crimes as well as his disturbing detachment toward them. The narrator, in this way, can create within us what Keen describes as “an unsettling feeling of invasion” initiated by “unwelcome characters who won’t obey or go away” (135). When the narrator conveys the variety of thoughts he has for disposing of his wife’s corpse, we may wonder why so much detail, so much information was included:

I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors.

Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At

another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor or the cellar.

(212)

The focalization in this particular section is uncomfortable in its unflinching detail, which seems to be included at this point to ensure readers' aversive responses to the narrator's behavior, to establish with finality the irrationality carefully masked behind his unsettling, rational façade.

The focalization of the narrator works in tandem with his psychopathic characterization to create a self-absorbed character who is entirely unreliable. Our ability to empathize with him is complicated by every aspect of his character. His lack of empathy and callousness to murder, along with his egocentricity, complicates readers' responses toward his character. Badenhausen encapsulates this empathic predicament particularly well:

If we find ourselves consciously identifying with Poe's narrator in any way, our response might be to shudder upon that recognition, to deny the identification, or to fear what that says about ourselves. If we sympathize with the narrator and recognize the existential underpinning of his situation, we replace the fear with alarm, over his missed chance for redemption. If we find the entire sequence of events simply difficult to comprehend . . . the only recourse is nervous laughter and the hope that we did not miss a joke understood by the rest of the audience. (187)

This variety of available responses attests to the difficulties inherent with narratives that flagrantly diverge from many concepts of morality, or at least understandable immorality. Perversity, as a motive, feels unreasonable to most

readers because it lacks the accountability sufficient to warrant an act as extreme as murder; it is a light excuse for such a heavy action. Ultimately, then, readers' abilities to experience empathy for the narrator depend on the credence they are able to give to his motive of perversity, the reasoning he offers for murdering his cat and wife because he was compelled to—simply because he knew he should not.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion: The Unlikely yet Productive Companionship of Poe and Narrative

Empathy—

And What Comes Next

The most prominent, and universally commented on, characteristic of Poe's short fiction are his narrators because of the way they expose their shocking, typically criminal behavior through their first-person perspectives. Working towards an effect of horror, Poe's narrative technique utilizes those structural elements that best suited his purpose; he used first-person narration, focalization, and narrative distance adeptly to construct stories with the potential to press readers beyond their comfort zones by visiting storyworlds infused with insanity, irrationality, and chaos. There is much to be gained from looking at Poe's fiction in tandem with narrative empathy. First, it gives us a new way of looking at Poe's work that has received little critical attention. Poe, as a writer, has been criticized for being over excessive and even indulgent in the way he persistently employs the Gothic in an attempt to terrify his readers; indeed, his desire to evoke horror is evident in many of his plots that lack subtlety in their intent. Gargano acknowledges this sentiment, and begins his argument in "The Question of Poe's Narrators" by recognizing some of the earlier criticism regarding Poe's work: "Part of the widespread critical condescension toward Edgar Allan Poe's short stories undoubtedly stems from impatience with what is taken to be his 'cheap' or embarrassing Gothic style. Finding turgidity, hysteria, and crudely poetic overemphasis in Poe's works, many critics refuse to accept him as a really serious writer" (177). Gargano includes the flashy indictments of

James Russell Lowell, who describes Poe's writings as "two-fifths sheer fudge" (140), and T.S. Eliot, who attributes to Poe "the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty" (298). Gargano, however, notices in Poe's writing distinctive structural patterns that are worthy of further literary analysis, such as the first-person perspective of his narrators. I agree with Gargano who sees Poe as "explor[ing] the neuroses of his characters with probing intelligence . . . see[ing] beyond the torment into its causes" (181), and add that Poe's short stories elicit emotional responses from readers because, not in spite of, his narrative excesses. The structure of Poe's fiction presents readers with difficult narrators who are capable of inducing negative emotional responses, which is why they have resisted forms of analysis that reach beyond Poe and his intentions as an author.

As I have argued, narrative empathy and Poe at first glance appear to be incompatible. This is because of the traditionally positive theorization of empathy that is so frequently conflated with sympathy. Poe's narrators, and the empathic responses they invite from readers, show how experiencing empathy for unlikable characters is not equivalent to condoning or agreeing with their behaviors. Taking another person's perspective does not mean that we agree with or condone that person's behavior, or that the feelings we experience while reading will necessarily result in altruistic behavior. As Amy Coplan explains, "you can imagine the other's suffering, yet simply disregard it, or you might empathize with a person who has committed a terrible crime, yet feel no sympathy for you think he thoroughly deserves his punishment" (145). Coplan's argument suggestively posits that empathy is frequently consistent with indifference. Take for example the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart": this narrator invites readers to

empathize with him, particularly at the end of his story when the police arrive to question him regarding sounds that were heard in the night. He describes the acute anxiety he feels because he believes the police know he killed the old man. The narrator describes in great detail the nervousness he feels, feelings which are simultaneously experienced by the reader if an empathic connection has been established. However, readers aren't likely to feel sympathy for the narrator when he is arrested because he has murdered an innocent victim. In other words, even if we have empathized with the narrator by taking his perspective, we are not likely to feel sympathy for him because the penalties he receives for his crimes are the consequences of his actions.

As we can see from "The Tell-Tale Heart," Poe's stories effectively demonstrate how important focalization is to experiencing empathy for characters. The first-person focalization of Poe's narrators reveals the types of characters they are; it determines how we feel about and respond to their accounting of events. Abbot explains that narrative voice is an important element in the construction of a story because it "lets us know just how [the narrator] injects into the narration her own needs and desires and limitations, and whether we should fully trust the information we are getting" (72). Admittedly, Poe's narrators inject their needs and intentions into their narratives in a manner that is contrary to expectations in that their desires have undesirable ends. For example, Montresor presents to the reader his need to punish Fortunato with impunity as a necessity for upholding his family's honor. However, according to Montresor, murder is the appropriate punishment, which is perplexing to the hypothetical reader who vehemently disagrees with the protagonist's malicious intentions yet feels

sympathy for the personal injuries his character has received. The point is, focalization is frequently the vehicle used to induce empathy and even sympathy for Machiavellian characters such as Montresor, which adds a layer of complexity to the concept of narrative empathy because it pushes readers to take the perspective of a murderer if they are to flesh out his motive, which is the cohesive thread woven throughout the narrative.

However, it is important to note that while focalization has the potential to induce empathic responses, it can impede them as well. In Poe's narratives the focalization varies, even though his stories are almost always told from the first-person point of view. And, as I have worked to show, the focalization works much like a zoom lens controlling the narrative distance which has the power to influence readers' empathic responses towards characters. Guerrero-Strachan observes that Poe's first-person narratives "enact the unification of narrator and narrated, narration and event, creator and created" (73). The first-person narration, through the variety of focalization, fuses together Poe's narrators with their tales in such a way that they become inseparable. It is almost impossible to employ a critical analysis of Poe's stories without discussing the narrator and his relationship to the narrative because Poe "creates a type of narrator who controls the narrative tightly by consciously narrowing the point of view and focus" (Guerrero-Strachan 74). The narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher," for example, controls the narrative distance by weaving his experience and perspective into that of Roderick so that their experiences become tangled together. The narrator, who is presumably present to simultaneously voice Roderick's experience while unraveling its Gothic mystery, rapidly begins to

suffer from the same degenerative presence which exudes from the House of Usher. He controls not only the distance readers have to Roderick's character, but also the exposure readers have to Roderick's psychological degeneration, as his narration is the only means of understanding his behavior. Consequently, readers must take the narrator's perspective if they are to unravel the Gothic mysteries of Usher, which means they first and foremost empathize with *him*, although they can certainly empathize with Roderick on perhaps a lesser level. In this regard, the narrator both impedes and facilitates readers' empathic responses towards Roderick through his focalization that controls the narrative distance in the Gothic storyworld.

The Gothic storyworld, through its narrative conventions, is a genre that warrants further study because of its distinctive incorporation of supernatural elements that potentially provoke or prohibit various forms of narrative empathy because of their fantastical settings. While this thesis addresses some specific Gothic conventions such as death, destruction, family degeneration, and the presence of supernatural phenomena, there is much more to be explored. Indeed, Poe's Gothic style is merely a fraction of the genre that is ripe and ready for narrative analysis. One of the distinguishing features of Poe's version of the Gothic is that his tales "show the compelling effects of disorder in the imaginative creation of his protagonist's worlds, without fussy recourse to normalizing frameworks" (Guerrero-Strachan 33). Other Gothic writers, however, offer different versions of disorder that have the potential to influence the empathic responses of readers. From Nathaniel Hawthorne to Flannery O'Connor, authors have adapted the traditional Gothic structure established in landmark works such

as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* to produce their own versions of the macabre. One commonality, however, in most versions of the Gothic is its dedication to the exploration of the dark side of society that, as Lloyd Smith Allan argues, produces shadows of "class anxieties, racial conflicts, and genocidal guilts, domestic oppressions, [and] the persistence of the past in the present" (35). The common themes in Gothic fiction lend themselves, as exemplified through Poe, to an analysis of narrative empathy, which is both appealing and necessary because of the challenges their structures present. While readers may find it potentially difficult to take the perspective of a character in a Gothic storyworld because of its fantastical setting and obvious fictionality, its more realistic tropes and their continued relevance have the potential to induce empathy and sympathy for characters and their situations. Ultimately, Gothic fiction and narrative empathy can engage in a reciprocal relationship through the structure of the Gothic that further demonstrates how empathy can be experienced for characters who bear little if any resemblance to readers, which further reveals the elastic, ever stretching boundaries of readers' empathic capacities.

The boundaries of narrative empathy, however, can be stretched beyond their limits through characters like the narrator in "The Black Cat," who I have argued potentially induces within readers an over aroused empathic response. This concept has been particularly useful in that it has helped me to establish that readers' capacities to empathize with immoral, potentially repulsive, characters are not limitless. Aversive emotional responses are, of course, dependent on each reader's individual tolerance for Poe's frequently graphic depictions of irrational violence inflicted on innocent victims. As Keen acknowledges, "readers'

experiences differ from one another, and empathy with characters doesn't always occur as a result of reading emotionally evocative fiction" ("A Theory of Narrative Empathy" 214). There are certainly many variables that contribute to a reader's willingness to empathize with difficult characters, but there are identifiable structural elements, such as characterization, that can increase the probability of empathic responsiveness. The way that the narrator in "The Black Cat" is characterized makes him extremely challenging to empathize with as he exhibits many psychopathic qualities. He feels no remorse, is self-centered, and lacks not only empathy but the ability to maintain successful relationships. Hester and Segir rightly observe that this narrator, because of his characteristics, creates a need for distance originating from readers' growing knowledge of his "superficial and impulsive nature, his need for immediate gratification, his lack of empathy, and his lack of understanding concerning the consequences of his behavior" (180). The aversive emotional response of readers towards characters such as this narrator are significant because they demonstrate that there are indeed limits to what readers are willing to experience while reading fiction. However, what might happen to the reader who persists on reading through an aversive emotional response toward a work of fiction? Might that reader experience less distress when reading that type of fiction in the future? And, if so, what does that suggest about the power of fiction? While I don't have the answers to these questions, I can say that they are evidence of potential areas that have yet to be explored regarding the scope and capacity of narrative empathy. There is much empirical research that could be conducted to assess the empathic responses readers have toward fiction like Poe's to determine why they were aversive, and

how that influenced their desires to read similar fiction in the future. Also, it would be useful to see which stories produced empathic over arousal, as that would help to determine which structural elements, such as point-of-view or Gothic setting, were most prevalent in inducing such negative emotional responses.

It is my hope that this project has effectively broadened the existing boundaries of narrative empathy by allowing us to understand that we can have empathic responses towards all types of characters, even toward Poe's narrators who murder and exploit their victims. Experiencing empathy for many characters is complex and can be uncomfortable, but still readily occurs, challenging the notion that reading fiction necessarily promotes altruistic behavior. Keen provocatively states that "the content of stories is not a neutral matter. If narrative fiction has the capacity to alter readers' characters for the good, it may also possess darker powers" (25). This is not to suggest that reading the fiction of Poe has the power to prompt one to murder. My claims are not that drastic. What it does suggest, however, is that reading fiction and experiencing empathy for difficult characters can powerfully invoke a variety of emotional responses from readers, not all of which are positive. As ironic as it sounds, experiencing negative emotions can be positive in that they demonstrate literature's affective potential. It stands to reason that the narrative structure of works of fiction directly influence the type of empathic responses readers are likely to have towards fictional characters. As I have argued, even stories with very similar narrative structures can yield differing empathic responses from readers based on aspects of focalization and characterization. Ultimately, narrative empathy can and should

continue to be applied to difficult characters, such as Poe's narrators, because it challenges its traditionally positive theorization. It shows that the enjoyment of fiction need not be contingent on relating to characters who bear similarities to readers; on the contrary, fiction can and should invite readers to empathize with a variety of characters who invoke a broad diversity of emotional responses from readers—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

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