

### Master's Thesis Project

Cover page for the Master's thesis

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## Abstract

In this thesis you can read about first-person narrators and how they can be linked to unreliability. For instance, how can a story be reliable when it is told by a first-person narrator who at the same time appears mentally unstable? Or what if the narrator is influenced by another character, can he then be trusted? One could also wonder if it is even possible for a first-person narrator to reliably tell his own story as it is rather difficult to view oneself from an outside perspective and notice how other people see you.

It is interesting why some authors decide to use a first-person narrator if it means letting go of the story's credibility – what is the point? But surely there must be benefits of using first-person narrators, too. In some cases, unreliability might even serve as an advantage in a story, and in other cases the author can use specific devices to help increase the credibility of both the narrator and the story. One of the authors who frequently used the first-person narrator and who succeeded in using unreliability in his tales to his advantage is Edgar Allan Poe.

This thesis examines the way the author, Edgar Allan Poe, used first-person narrators and the device of unreliability in his tales. This is done by taking a closer look at both Edgar Allan Poe as an author and person and by looking at a selection of five of his works.

A brief outline of Poe's life quickly determines that his life was filled with tragedy and hard luck, which leads some critics to conclude that Poe simply wrote with his own life as inspiration, but perhaps it is not as simple as that. A classification of Poe's longer and shorter narratives determine that Poe wrote more than just tales of terror, but also tales of fantasy and tales of ratiocination came from his hand.

The selection of Poe's works chosen for this study covers all these groups. The first choice is Poe's only completed novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. The four short stories are "The Cask of Amontillado", "William Wilson", "The Fall of the House of

Usher” and “The Purloined Letter”. These five works are all characterized in terms of style of narration and reliability. Lastly Poe’s use of first-person narration is examined for common traits and patterns, as it seems as if Poe favored the protagonist as narrator and to a lesser degree the minor character as narrator. This becomes obvious as only two of Poe’s sixty-five short stories has a third-person narrator.

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## 1. Introduction

At the time of writing, a hundred and seventy-one years have gone by since the death of Edgar Allan Poe. During these years after his death, a lot has been said and written about Poe's works which prompted only few remarks while he was still alive even though a very extensive amount of writing was produced from Poe's hand. His works include both a creative part and a non-fiction part. Despite the fact that his non-fiction writings make up the largest part of his authorship, it is his prose works he is known for today. If one were to look at the ratio of the type of writings Poe did, the extent of his creative writings can be gathered and combined to fit into what is corresponding to a single volume of poetry and five volumes of tales. The creative writings are supplemented with the equivalent to ten volumes of non-fictional letters and criticisms. Even though the creative writings are considered the major part of Poe's authorship, the letters and criticisms are also considered to be of great significance as they appear to be holding the key to who Edgar Allan Poe was as an author but also to his thoughts about the literary world. It seems almost impossible to make any logical or serious assessments of Poe's authorship without eyeing these criticisms and letters, too.

When it comes to Poe's literary brilliance, most readers, including some critics, have a tendency to refer it to his chaotic and muddled mind or to his dark, semi-obsessive state rather than to his perceptual and dexterous creative powers. It seems insinuated that the effects Poe created in his often quite bizarre tales was either pure coincidental or at best done by means which were thought to be deceitful and morally dubious. Other critics, who appear rather unsympathetic but also a bit sophisticated, are more inclined to disregard Poe's stories as nothing more than out-of-date tales written by a Gothic juvenilia and neither the stories, nor the author is worthy of serious reading (Winters 379). Hence, Poe's talent is devalued to nothing more than a basket of tricks controlled by a crafty but cheap charlatan. However,

there are also still a group of Poe's dedicated followers who rebuff these views. Those are the critics who believe in Poe's vast talent, including his perceptual and dexterous creative powers, and they believe he has a place among the history's best literary minds, as Harold Bloom states in his introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe*, "... for better or worse, was and is the American mind, but Poe was and is our hysteria, our uncanny unanimity in our repressions" (Bloom 5).

When going through Poe's prose works, a thing that draws attention is the choice of narration he used. From a total of sixty-five short stories only two of them have a third-person narrator, the remaining sixty-three stories all have a first-person narrator. This is quite surprising as first-person narrators often are considered notoriously unreliable. But somehow Poe has found a method to employ this type of narrator in a way that creates maximum effect with the readers. In fact, today Edgar Allan Poe is notoriously famous for writing stories using unreliability. But how can unreliability be seen and made to be seen unfolding in narratives? And how does Poe use this unreliability and with which effect?

This thesis examines unreliability in first-person narrators, and it investigates how unreliability and first-person narration are used in Poe's narratives and what types of literary effects the use of these techniques of narration and unreliability generates.

By analyzing a selection of Poe's prose works covering just over a decade of his authorship, this study will examine the literary effects carefully created by Poe, through the use of first-person narrators. These writings, which contain a variety of his short stories, of horror, fantasy and ratiocination, as well as a novel length story, will demonstrate his constant attentiveness to states of mind and demonstrate how they, in the reader's mind, can generate a lasting effect.

## 2. Edgar Allan Poe

For a long time, Edgar Allan Poe and his authorship have been an issue of much controversial debate. Severe critics suggest that his works was the manifestation of his personality and character, claiming that the forces that wrote Poe's works also were the same forces that destroyed his life (Krutch 19). Because of this statement, it makes sense to investigate how Poe's life developed into something that would inspire him to create such gloomy dark stories.

Gloomy and dark are words that fit well when describing the life of Edgar Allan Poe, as his life was full of bad luck and tragedy.

Poe was born in 1809 in Boston. Poe's mother was Elizabeth Arnold, who was a noticeable actress, and his father, David Poe Jr., worked in the same industry. The couple had three children, with Edgar as the middle child. When Edgar Allan Poe was about a year old, he was struck by the first run of bad luck, as his father left and abandoned the little family. About a year later in 1811, another tragedy struck when Poe's mother died, leaving him and his siblings orphaned. The Poe children were sent to three different foster homes. Edgar was taken in by tobacco merchant, John Allan, and his wife, Frances. Poe liked the Allan family, and he went with the family to England where he was sent to good schools. When the family returned to the States, Poe enrolled at the University of Virginia (Krutch 27). Poe did well at university, and he began writing poems in his spare time. But because the Allan family only contributed a small amount to pay for school, Poe had to find the rest of the money himself, which proved to be rather difficult, so Poe ran into some debt. Then he began to gamble, in an attempt to win money in order to pay back what he owed, but instead he ended up losing even more money. This is also around the time when his drinking accelerated. When John Allan learned about the debt, he refused to pay it for him, and consequently Poe was forced to leave

the university before the end of his first year. Poe then joined the army and quickly rose to the rank of sergeant major. At that point he asked John Allan to help him get into the military academy, West Point, which John Allan accepted (Krutch 32). Poe began at West Point in the summer of 1830, while still writing prose in his spare time. He had actually succeeded in getting a collection of poems published in the early 1830s with the help and funding from friends. At West Point, Poe showed off his talents in both French and mathematics and became rather known for them. But once again tragedy struck, when first Poe's foster mother, Frances, died, and then not long after John Allan died, too. And to top it all, Poe learned that he was not even mentioned in John Allan's will, which meant no inheritance from the great Allan family fortune. With all this misfortune, it began to go downhill for Poe. His drinking increased, he skipped classes and missed important roll calls, and in the end, Poe was expelled from West Point. Hereafter there was nothing more for Poe to do than to begin focusing on his writing (Baym 683 ff.).

Up until and during 1835, Poe lived in poverty in Baltimore with his aunt and her young daughter, Virginia. In August of that year, Poe got a job as an editorial assistant at a Richmond-based magazine called *Southern Literary Messenger*. The job meant that he had to move to Richmond, but before he did that he married his cousin Virginia who was just 13 years old at the time. Two years later, Poe was fired from his editorial job. The reasons given were both his drinking and his demand for a bigger paycheck, but also his fairly regular crashes with his boss on how to run the magazine is believed to be a contributing factor. Poe then moved with his family to New York in 1838, and this is where his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* was published. It did earn him a bit of money, and the Poe family left New York and moved on to Philadelphia. Generally, the family lived in extreme poverty in Philadelphia, but despite that Poe continued to write. In 1839 he got a job

as co-editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* where he published book reviews and stories, including some of his own. At the end of the decade, Poe was at the top of his writing game - well-known as a writer of tales although both his private life as well as his professional life continued to be wobbly. In May 1840 he was, once again, fired for excessive drinking, though he quickly got another job with one of his former editors at a new magazine called *Graham's*. In 1842 tragedy hit Poe yet again; Poe's young wife, Virginia Poe, who was not even 20 years old yet, was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The disease was very hard for the young woman's body, and she never recovered. She remained bedbound for five years before she died in 1847. During the time, while Virginia was ill, Poe was still drinking a lot, but he also continued to publish short stories and poems, including some of his most famous works, like for example "The Raven". After the death of his wife, Poe continued drinking and kept publishing his writings right up till his own death in 1849.

Today it is not his criticism Poe is most famous for but his prose works are recognized as works of arts. "The Raven" and "To Helen" made him renowned worldwide. Poe was an enormous inspiration for poets and writers both at home in the States but also abroad. This is also mentioned in Edward Shanks book about Poe, where Baudelaire notices him, "Baudelaire discovered some of his works which has appeared in translation in French magazines. The effect on Baudelaire was extraordinary, almost like that of a sudden religious conversation". (Shanks 162)

But it was not only as an inspiration Poe was known. For long Poe and his works have been a matter of great debate. Several critics have suggested that his works were the manifestation of his own personality. Some of the criticizers at that time actually went so far that they suggested the powers of Poe's works was what ruined the author's life. Henry Canby, who was a professor of literature at Yale University in the early 1900s, had a

somewhat fairer and more unprejudiced reasoning of Poe's works, which he addressed in the book, he published in 1909, called *The Short Stories in English*. Canby wrote:

The morbid figures of Poe's imagination, be they untrue, or fabricated from supernatural truth, make you feel the horror, beauty, mystery, or terror of the mind. And they do it whether you like them or not. They accomplish legitimate results, thanks to technique, and that is all that art requires of them. (Canby 243)

A lot of Poe's writings came from the areas of sensation and horror, but at the same time he was required to provide the readers with what they desired or else he could risk them overlooking his works which also made him look to the cheap popular fiction for a little inspiration. However, Poe was not writing about horrifying events because his own soul was filled with horror; nor was he writing about plagues, shadows, death, and entombment because the darkness had blackened his soul and left it evil and sinful: he observed that the literary age of great romance was transitory, that the magazines were looking for new material that could produce the maximum result within the small space at their disposal, and he determinedly created a technique to use for writing short stories which was a natural development succeeding the romantic movement.

Poe wrote of horrifying events in the hope that he would be read by an audience who would appreciate and respect him. His talents lie in his attention to form and structure of his texts. In the essay, "The Philosophy of Composition", Poe himself explains his method of composition in detail. And in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* from 1842, Poe reveals his principles for writing short stories and why he dislikes novels. This will be further elaborated in the chapter about Poe's long narratives.

Today Poe is respected as a master of design. He appreciated mindful and considered art. It was what he himself both preached and practiced. It seems as if Poe was eager to teach others how to generate an effect that fits well into writing a seemingly impulsive story as a short

story appears much more impulsive than any other art form. As one of the most common ways of experiencing a language is through storytelling it goes to show just how important the narrative art is. This includes re-counting all sort of events and repeating stories already read or heard. Therefore, the next logical move would be to attempt to figure out how Poe, the Master of the art, has told his stories.

Every academic discussion about the short story starts with Edgar Allan Poe and his tales, which are rightly considered to be among the very best examples of the short story form in the whole world; at least according to Edward Shanks, who in 1937 wrote the book called *Edgar Allan Poe*. On the subject of Poe's influence, Shanks claims,

He was, however, a master of the short story. On several occasions he succeeded in using this medium so as to say perfectly what he had to say. In the field of verse, it was his vision rather than his expression of it which influenced other men. In the field of prose his influence has been potent over men with quite other visions than his. The remark has often been made that he was the father of the modern short story, and it is true that there is no magazine published to-day which would be quite the same if Poe had never lived. (Shanks 104-105)

Barrett H. Clark, who in 1931 edited the book *Great Short Stories of the World*, agrees with Shanks in the matter of Poe's influence. Clark mentions that Poe "... influenced nearly every writer, especially the Europeans, since his day. He brought the short story to a point of technical perfection which has never been surpassed" (Clark 946). Like all other art forms, the short story develops in the direction of perfection, however, for Poe's antecedents, who wrote in the short story form, it might be the case that they were generally unaware of the technical methods they used. According to Poe, it is not uncommon for some authors to handle their resources in this way in order to create a specific artistic effect; but when they create their material, they do not follow any laws apart from the law of necessity, and this makes them automatically believe that they will create the result they are hoping for. In his essay "The

Philosophy of Composition”, he claims that there is something wrong with the way most authors produce their stories,

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis – or one is suggested by an incident of the say – or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative – designing, generally, to fill in with descriptions, dialogue, or aural comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent. (Poe: Essay & Reviews 13)

Poe examined the methods used by great authors and from that he construed the technical principles connected to writing. He possessed the drive to create, and he was well aware of the resources he used. Poe concluded that the effect should be decided first, and then afterwards the materials and the concerns of the story should be added. He explains his own method as follows,

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view – for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest – I say to myself, in the first place, ‘Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?’ Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone – whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, by peculiarity both of incident and tone – afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect”. (Poe: Essay & Reviews 13-14)

Poe was very attentive to the techniques he used to express the strong impressions during the course of the short stories.

Poe was a classic man of his time, significantly influenced already from a young age by great writers such as John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley and by the various cultural

traditions from around Europe, both from when he lived in England himself as a boy and by the European literature he read. In Poe's time the world was romantic, which was a period that required strong opinions of individuality and imagination. Poe provided the reader who was looking for a stronger variation of romanticism with a different kind of tale and with it followed a completely different awareness. He was willing to write what the audience wanted and therefore also what the magazines wanted to publish. Poe recognized the act of telling a story as more attention-grabbing to people of all age groups than other forms of composition would be. He also believed that amazement was the most interesting effect an author could create, and anyone who succeeded in creating this effect would be presented with great opportunities (Ibid.).

As a romanticist, Poe saw beyond reality and looked into a dream world afar. His imagination was implemented with its fullest power. This brought intensity and force to the short story. The artistic material provided by the everyday life was not to Poe's satisfaction. When he wanted to create a story, he preferred to compose it out of other materials than what his everyday experience presented.

When people mention Poe as being original, they mean that he is different from other authors in terms of writing style or tone and in terms of the themes he chose. Poe was well aware of what he was doing, and he knew exactly how he intended to do it (Ibid.). His perception as well as his practice teaches people to have respect for considered art, or at least what Poe believed to be considered art. If Poe, in a story, focusses the reader's attention on the ambiance, he needs to intensify the reader's awareness of the time and place by only using the characters and events. Conceivably, there is none of Poe's tales which better demonstrates his power and ability to suggest much more than he utters in words than in "The Fall of the House of Usher" from 1839. In this tale it is very clear, that the reader's attention should only

be focused upon one single effect. Brander Matthews, who is the author of a book about writing short stories called *The Short Story*, agrees with Poe and says,

This is definite and precise beyond all misunderstanding, - the short-story must do one thing only, and it must do this completely and perfectly; it must not loiter or digress; it must have unity of action, unity of temper, unity of tone, unity of color, unity of effect; and it must vigilantly exclude everything that might interfere with its singleness of intention. (Matthews, introduction)

There is a great variety of both themes and styles in Poe's tales. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the structure in a selection of Poe's tales and to examine the strategies he employs in telling them. This leads us to the next chapter, which takes a closer look at the form of narration.

### **3. Structure of narration and a definition of unreliability**

When it comes to the practice of narration, Poe had an obvious fondness for the "first person narrator", which probably is because he believed the stories would be catchier or more intense if they were told by a narrator who had experienced it all first-hand. But the risk, when choosing such a narrator, is the reliability of the narrator. It can be rather difficult to establish a first person narrator as reliable when the reader only experiences that person's side of the endeavors, however this does not seem to have been an issue Poe felt he needed to worry about. The first part of this chapter will be the search for a definition of unreliability and the second part will be a look at the special requirements a first-person narrator imposes upon an author, and the risks, complications and drawbacks that could follow such a choice.

When searching for a definition of unreliability in narrators, it felt natural to go back to the trusted old companion that followed me all around the English literary studies. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M.H. Abrams, the term of unreliability is addressed but it does not include a precise definition, however, Abrams does bring up some interesting points, which

are usable when searching for a definition. The first point is this; if the narrator has a different understanding of things than the author, the narrator is deemed unreliable. Abrams explains:

We ordinarily accept what a narrator tells us as authoritative. The fallible or unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose perception, interpretation, and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates do not coincide with the opinions and norms implied by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share.

(Abrams 304)

Thus, it may be the case that the narrator does not share the opinion of the author and the reader which leads to the feeling of unreliability. The second point is the use of an, for lack of a better word, irritating character as a narrator, who can annoy the reader so much, that they simply do not listen to a word the narrator says. "... repeated use of the narrator whose excessive innocence, or over-sophistication, or moral obtuseness, makes him a flawed and distorting 'center of consciousness' in the work; the result is an elaborate structure of ironies" (Abrams 305). In such cases, the reliability is destroyed even before the narrator's opinion is known, the problem is the personality of the narrator which is rather ironic as the narrator is a character invented by the author. Abrams' third and last point is that perhaps using a narrator, who generates doubts in the reader, is exactly the effect the author wanted to create. "... an instance of fantastic literature, which (...) defines as deliberately designed by the author to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty whether the events are to be explained by reference to natural causes (...) or to supernatural causes" (Abrams 305). This is actually the case in several of Poe's stories, like for example in the tale of "William Wilson", where the narrator is of a rather questionable state of mind which will be elaborated later on in chapter five.

The literary critic, Seymour Chatman, agrees with Abrams on the issue of unreliability of a narrator with a questionable behavior, which he addresses in his book, *Coming to Terms: the Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*: "Because there is something terribly wrong with

the “I”-narrator-protagonist, we suspect that there might be something wrong with the story he tells. It would be surprising if his account of the events were more reliable than his deeds” (Chatman 190). Chatman has a good point here, but on the other hand, if it is indeed the author’s point that the reader should trust and follow the narrator, regardless of his state of mind, perhaps the focus should be on how it is to live with the troubles the narrator is going through, instead of whether he is reliable or not.

William Riggan joins in in the discussion with his article “Pícaros, Madmen, Naïfs, and Clowns: the Unreliable First-Person Narrator”, in which he seems to argue that all first-person fiction could be deemed unreliable: “First-person narration is, then, always at least potentially unreliable, in that the narrator, with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words, or motives” (Riggan 19–20). The point Riggan is making here, is that the possibility of the narrator being unreliable is present, and the reader needs to take that into account; it serves as a friendly reminder for the reader to at least be aware of the possibility.

Riggan takes the discussion one step further because he points out that the concept of unreliability does not solely involve first-person protagonist narrators who tell about their own ventures, but it also covers the cases where a minor character functions as the narrator and tells the story of the protagonist. He states:

Such a narrator can only report to the best of his ability and recollection the overt words and actions of his protagonist’s life and draw from these his inferences and interpretations concerning the inner nature of that protagonist. He is incapable of penetrating directly into the psyche of the protagonist or of any other character within the chronicle. (Riggan 22)

Basically, Riggan’s point here is that all minor characters who also narrate the stories are restricted as there are limits to their knowledge. So according to Riggan all narrators,

regardless of their position in the story, could potentially be unreliable.

There are, however, a lot of opinions on the matter, and some of the critics have a somewhat different view of unreliability; here they do not believe the unreliability is in fact about the characters. In the article “A Theoretical Outline of Narrative Unreliability. The Rhetorical Stance”, Lorena Mihaes explains how she believes that instead of focusing on the personality traits of a fictional character in order to establish whether or not that character is reliable, it would make more sense to focus on the narrative unreliability as something belonging to the tale’s discourse. Mihaes says:

The narrator may be either misinformed or not willing to report the story facts and his inaccurate discourse is undermined by the story through the implied reader’s inference of what actually happens. By underscoring the fact that the locus of unreliability is not the personality of the narrator (a morally evil narrator may give a perfectly reliable account) but the narrator’s view at the level of discourse (...) it seems more appropriate to speak about narrative unreliability, a property of discourse, rather than the unreliable narrator, a personality trait of a fictional entity. (Mihaes 3)

This brings us back to the author; what is the author’s intent with his story? What is the message he is trying to convey? Perhaps Mihaes has a point here; maybe it is better to focus on the story as a whole, and then, yes, the story could end up being unreliable.

Chatman had a similar thought – actually Mihaes is most likely inspired by Chatman, as his book was published 20 years before – however, Chatman mentions unreliable narration and that he believes it is the author’s way of being ironic:

In ‘unreliable narration’ the narrator’s account is at odds with the implied reader’s surmises about the story’s real intentions. The story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by ‘reading out’, between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been ‘like that’, and so we hold the narrator suspect. Unreliable narration is thus an ironic form. (Chatman 233)

This idea of unreliable narration connected to irony is not only linked to Chatman. In fact, many of his fellow literary critics agree with him. Greta Olson, a professor of North American literature, wrote the article, “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators”, in which she investigates the development of the use of unreliability in literature. In her article, Olson takes us back to the beginning with an introduction to Wayne Booth, who is considered the originator of the theory. Olson tells of Booth: “Booth understands narrator unreliability to be a function of irony. Irony provides the formal means by which distance is created between the views, actions, and voice of the unreliable narrator and those of the implied author” (Olson 94). So in Booth’s opinion the use of irony – and in that sense also the use of unreliability – is used to generate detachment between the narrator and his actions, but for the reader it can be an interesting experience when he detects the irony. “Those who grasp irony and detect unreliability share the insider joke and enjoy having survived the initiation ritual the text appears to require” (Olson 94-95). One could make the argument that finding the irony and noticing the unreliability within a story is a way to form a bond with it, to get on the good side of the story, so to speak.

Olson goes on to explain why it sometimes can be rather difficult to spot irony in a story. “... the recognition of the narrator's inconsistencies does not actually occur as between two persons on an intratextual level. The implied author does not point her finger at the unreliable narrator or wink at the reader. Rather, this illustrative analogy is used to stress the reading sophistication that detecting unreliability requires” (Olson 95). The complexity of the reading is high, because the reader only has the text to relate to, no facial expressions, no body language or tone of voice to help make things clear as there often is with an interaction with another person.

As mentioned, it can be difficult to figure out how to go about discovering the unreliability. Olson divides it into two categories stating that:

At one end of the spectrum, untrustworthy narrators contradict themselves immediately or announce outright that they are insane. At the other end, readers are required to do more "detective" work to determine whether a narrator is trustworthy or not, and critics remain divided about how to characterize the storyteller (...) The pertinent question is to what extent the narrator is exposed, or whether she exposes herself, as dispositionally untrustworthy. (Olson 104)

In Olson's opinion the key element to figuring out if a story is unreliable or not is for the reader to determine whether the narrator reveals himself as unreliable or if the story does it for him.

Another difficulty is that all readers are different, and they do not necessarily view the narrators the same way. One reader might be more likely to accept a narrative as reliable while another reader might not. The way a story and a narrator is approached also varies from reader to reader, as Olson also mentions:

When judging Narrators as unreliable, readers treat them like new acquaintances. Readers bring implicit theories of personality as well as scripts for how narrators behave to every text they read (...) it is clear that readers detect unreliability as they might diagnose mental illness: signs of irregularity are noted, and they are understood within the personal and literary schemata of unreliability. However, many unreliable narrators are not mad monologists but somewhat untrustworthy or simply fallible. How readers respond to these types of narrators differs, as do their attempts to determine what makes them unreliable. This leads readers to make different kinds of attributions about fallible and untrustworthy narrators... (Olson 99)

This will, no doubt, result in very different opinions on how a story and a narrator should be viewed.

With all these opinions on unreliability and irony, it appears to be a rather complicated

concept to use. But what does an author need to be attentive to when using a first-person narrator whether it be a protagonist or a minor character? Are the special requirements enough to make up of the risks and disadvantages of choosing such a concept?

The matter of acceptance and credibility is not as simple a construct as one might have thought, and as we just witnessed in the abovementioned some readers might be susceptible to believe everything they read, no matter how bizarre or wild a story it is. But essentially, there are two types of credibility: the first one is the overall circumstances and the peripheral activities, the other one is about the narrator – how is his character, what are his motives, and whether or not he is reliable as the one telling the story. Obviously, both of these are indistinguishably linked to the story, but when trying to establish the pitfalls of this method it makes sense to view them independently.

Regarding the overall circumstances and the peripheral events, the author needs to justify to the reader why the narrator was present at the events in question and also his whereabouts when telling the story. This means the author has to create a suitable relationship for both the narrator and the reader regarding both distance and time of the events in the story. The author should see to it that the narrator's physical and psychological situation is conceivable when it comes to the actions; for instance, if something should happen to the narrator (like perhaps dying) It would make it implausible for him to narrate the events. In such cases the author could use a device such as a journal, a diary or a letter or even a written confession to keep the narrator credible, and they have the added bonus of bringing variety to the style of narration.

One of the prickliest and challenging jobs for an author in stories where the protagonist is also the narrator is the actual characterization of said narrator; because it goes without saying that a person rarely sees himself the same way as other people see him. If the reader is to be deeply and compassionately involved with the protagonist's emotions and escapades then the

narrating protagonist must be very cautious when speaking of himself. If he claims to have marvelous qualities, he needs to back up the statements with some form of qualification or apology, something, anything to balance it out, otherwise the author runs the risk of the reader rejecting the narrator because of his arrogance and egotistical importance and, consequently, will question everything he says.

The author encounters another problem with this kind of story, which is to keep a suitable balance between self-analysis, self-absorption and the series of events. The author needs to have focus on his narrator and make sure that he is mindful of the reader. A device such as the written manuscript is practical in this case, as it introduces itself to the audience and incorporates an unspecified reader. By using this device, the author does not have to consider the reader as anything more than just a reader, and this allows him to direct his attention towards the narrator's story. Those stories, where the narrator speaks directly to the individual reader, distracts the attention of the reader and leads it to the narrator in the present time, where he tells the story, and away from the particular story he is narrating.

Of course there are others and more general hitches and complications which are characteristic for this form of narration. The technique, where the protagonist also functions as the narrator, loses the variation and the opinions of the minor characters; but on the other hand the technique, where a minor character functions as the narrator, loses the intensity and intimacy of knowing what is going on inside the protagonist's head. The reader only gets the perspective of a witness.

#### **4. A classification of Poe's narratives**

It has proven rather hard to classify Poe's tales - are they tongue-in-cheek exaggerations of popular fiction, or are they serious efforts to add to or modify those fictions, or perhaps they are both these things at the same time?

The short narratives and the long narratives are divided into two groups in the following chapters. This is done to clarify the quite distinctive and hostile relationship Poe had with the long narratives, but also to establish the passion with which he wrote the short narratives. The short narratives are further divided into three subcategories; Tales of terror, tales of fantasy, and tales of ratiocination.

#### *4.1. The short narratives*

Poe's composition of his many short narratives follows a rather simple recipe. As Poe states in his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition" written in 1846, the course of action is set; first he decides which effect he wishes to generate, and then he chooses the elements most suited to help him create the desired effect (Poe: Essays & Reviews 16).

As mentioned above, the short narratives are here divided into three subcategories. These three categories are chosen because they cover most of Poe's tales. But of course further categories could easily be added, but then some of the tales might overlap and end up belonging in several categories. And for the purpose of this study, these three categories will be sufficient.

*Tales of Terror* is the first category. In his tales of terror, Poe mixes symbols of conventional folklore with the classic Greek technique of dramatic unity, meaning the tales have to have a single action in a single place within a single day in order to create the horror of the soul that originates from a person's estrangement from civilization and from that person's pursuit of illicit knowledge. Moreover, Poe frequently picks imageries predisposed to multiple interpretations to produce patterns in his tales. Poe's states in "The Philosophy of Composition" that he "kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable" (Poe: Essays & Reviews 16).

Elements which often appear in Poe's tales of terror are journeys to the underworld and the

concept of death of beauty; Poe uses them to establish the horrific mood in the tales. To deliver the soul-touching horror the reader can feel crawl down his backs, he uses concepts like revenge from beyond the grave and resurrection of the dead.

In the review Poe wrote of Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird's "Shepherd Lee", he remarks that the writer should evade "directness of expression ... Writing as if the author were firmly impressed with the truth, yet astonished by the immensity of the wonders he relates". This is a technique used by Poe in all of his tales of terror. He does not come right out and tell what has occurred in any of the tales. Poe permits the reader to make his own deductions constructed by the feeling of astonishment the narrator is overpowered by, leaving him incapable of relating the actions directly, "leaving the result as a wonder not to be accounted for" (Poe: Essays & Reviews 402).

Poe's later works in the tales of terror category, written from 1839 and up to his death, show how he continued to use the individual person's estrangement from society and imageries of both shadows and anima to generate the special horrific effects.

*Tales of fantasy* is the second category. In all of Poe's prose works, the archetypical imageries are used as the groundwork where he goes to construct the desired effects, and it can be rather difficult to separate the tales of terror from the tales of fantasy, as there are apparent overlaps. However, in the tales of terror, the imageries lie hidden underneath the surface of the events, but in the tales of fantasy it is quite frequently the archetypical imageries that are the actual story, just as in the tale of "William Wilson", where the shadow turns out to be a real character. A case which will be elaborated later on.

The well-known Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, has since addressed the circumstances surrounding a person expressing an essential unconscious element. And basically, his belief was that the more extensively the unconscious element operates, the more commonly

effective is the symbol within a person, because the unconscious element provokes an echo in all souls (Jung 21). In the tales of fantasy, it is all about the unconscious.

Tales of ratiocination is the third and final category. This is the category where the detective stories are found. The structure here is to present a crux in the very early stages of the tale, and then untangle the mystery as the story progresses. Great cleverness is the imprint these tales leave, however, Poe did not value them as highly as his more intense and poetic tales. Poe believed that the popularity of the tales of ratiocination was mostly due to fact that it was something original. The reader assumed the tales to be more ingenious than what they actually were as the author had untangled the web he himself had spun with the specific purpose of being the one who does the untangling. The classic detective story would normally open with some kind of crime. Dupin, who is Poe's characteristic detective in the most of the tales of ratiocination, starts his work right from the moment the crime occurred. When the tale begins, the reader learns that every little event regarding the crime is what leads to the uncovering of why, how and by whom the crime was perpetrated.

Poe's goal is to construct a bewildering situation and attempt to keep the reader out of the loop until the appropriate time when the explanation is offered. An explanation, which by the way, typically ends up being very simple.

#### *4.2. The long narratives*

For Poe, it was important to secure a certain tone in his works. And this specific tone he obtained with the use of a domineering mood. If he was to have achieved a greater part of structure and dynamic expansion, as required in a novel, it would have caused monotony and tediousness brought about by the large proportion and elongation of the mood. Consequently, a novel written by Poe seems inconceivable. And besides, it would still have been unthinkable even if he had had the human interest and the sense of character-development that the classic

novel calls for because that is just not what Poe is fascinated by. He is much more into the short story, as it creates “a singleness of effect” which the classic novel does not. Poe addresses this matter in a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories called *Twice Told Tales*. The review was published in *Graham's Magazine* in May of 1842. Poe wrote:

We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, (...) As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simply cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences - resulting from wariness or interruption. (...) The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided. (Poe: *Essays & Reviews* 572)

This statement leaves no doubts of Poe's opinion about the novel-length narratives. It is all about keeping the reader's focus from the beginning to the end of a story. It is about making sure the reader is not distracted by real life or other possible diversions so he, as a result, might end up forgetting essential elements of the story when he finally returns to it. A reader is not supposed to pause his reading when he has started, it is only tolerable to put it down when you have finished the whole story.

Nevertheless, Poe actually did give the novel genre a try. Four years prior to writing the mentioned review he published his only longer narrative characterized as a novel. It was called *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. He did, however, give the genre

one more try two years later with *The Journal of Julius Rodman*, but this story was published as a series in a magazine and it was never finished which is why the story was never characterized as a novel. With this knowledge, it would seem as if Poe attempted to caution Nathaniel Hawthorne and other authors regarding the limitations of a longer narrative.

## 5. Characterization of Poe's narratives:

In this chapter a selection of Poe's narratives will be presented and thereafter further examined with the purpose of analyzing Poe's use of first person narrators. The first narrative selected is *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, which, as mentioned, is Poe's only completed novel-length story. The second narrative chosen is "The Cask of Amontillado", and the third one chosen is "William Wilson", both of these are from Poe's gothic tales. These three choices all have the same structure with regards to point of view and type of narration, which is a first person narrator, who at the same time also functions as the protagonist of the story.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is the fourth tale chosen, which, too, belongs to the gothic tales' category. And finally, the last tale chosen is "The Purloined letter", which is one of Poe's detective stories. These two stories are chosen because, despite the obvious difference in genre, they both have a first person narrator, but the narrator is not the protagonist it is instead a minor character who is telling the story.

### 5.1. Characterization of *The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

In July of 1838 *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* was published. As somewhat of a habit for Poe, his narrative is presented with a disclaimer. This is something Poe does in an attempt to heighten the credibility whenever he is worried some readers might have difficulty accepting certain elements within his tales. In this disclaimer Poe calls

attention to the fact that the story of Arthur Gordon Pym is written from memory, as he did not keep any journals, and also that his version of the story only can be confirmed by one man "and he a half-breed Indian", meaning that the credibility is dubious. By doing this he allows his readers to explain away or discount any incidents or events in the story which they may find questionable.

Poe continues by telling that in a conversation with Pym, he proposed to publish the novel "under the garb of fiction", and to help the novel be accepted as fiction, Poe permitted Pym to write Poe's name in the byline (Poe: Poetry & Tales 1008)<sup>2</sup>. At the end of the book, Poe writes in a note that he said no to finishing the Mr. Pym's narrative because of the "general inaccuracy of the details afforded him and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration" (1180).

After having expressed his disclaimers, Poe starts the story by presenting the people sailing with Pym and explains how Pym ended up on board the *Grampus*. Pym owns a sailboat of his own, which he names the *Ariel*. In a play by William Shakespeare called "The *Tempest*", *Ariel* is a spirit who helps the protagonist by controlling a storm, thereby letting the passengers abandon ship while preserving the crew and vessel and leaving it unharmed. In this case, Pym uses the *Ariel* to introduce the longer accounts of their endeavors onboard the *Grampus* and of his adventures onboard the *Jane Guy* by sharing one of the experiences he had with Augustus on board the *Ariel*.

After an evening of heavy drinking, August and Pym decide to take the *Ariel* out to sea. With Pym's minor nautical knowledge, it is Augustus who is at the helm; but, as it turns out, Augustus is "beastly drunk" (1011). And when a storm begins brewing, things at sea escalate. Pym does not notice the large whaling-ship that sails over them as the storm intensifies. The

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<sup>2</sup> All the following references to Poe's stories are to this edition.

next thing he remembers is onboard the whaling-ship, where he learns that both Augustus and he himself were saved by two men of the crew. The account Augustus gives of his own rescue is used by Poe to foreshadow the rest of the tale through a sort of voyage to the underworld because Augustus finds “himself beneath the surface, whirling round and round with inconceivable rapidity, and with a rope wrapped in three or four folds tightly about his neck” (1016). This particular image is also rather similar to that of a birthing experience where the rope is a symbol of the umbilical cord. Poe uses this symbol to foreshadow Pym's journey. A journey to the underworld of the vessel where Pym begins his maritime voyages and also his arrival back to the world of the living once Augustus exposes Pym's presence to Dirk Peters, who is their only helper in taking back the *Grampus* from the mutineers, who have seized the vessel and relieved the captain, Augustus' father, from command.

As mentioned above, Pym starts his voyages with a trip to the underworld which is signified here by the seizing of the vessel. Poe uses mythological references and biblical references to reinforce this image. Pym was initially supposed to have stayed below for three days only; however, by the end of the third day Augustus comes to see him with news of the ship's impending departure. During their conversation, Augustus says, “I suppose you can't tell how long you have been buried--only three days” (1024). Which as it happens also is the exact duration of Christ's entombment. However, on the third day Christ rose from his tomb. Right after Augustus' visit, Pym falls asleep. A sleep so deep he believes it “must have lasted for more than three entire days and nights” (1040).

And it is not until many days later Pym is released. Poe builds further on to establish his image of the underworld by bringing Tiger, Pym's faithful dog, into the picture while Pym is haunted by bad dreams of nature gone askew. Tiger, the dog, though in this case friendly, seems rather like the images of Cerebus. In Greek mythology, Cerebus is the hound that

watches and protects the entrance to the underworld.

Once again, Poe presents elements that will help his readers to accept the story. Throughout most of the journey, Pym suffers from dehydration and hunger causing hallucinations. This method, frequently used by Poe, where the narrator is subjected to some kind of mental deviation, allows the more doubtful reader to accept events that can appear incredible or paranormal in context of the physical condition and mindset of the narrator.

All through Pym's voyage, Poe uses imageries of birth, death, and rebirth. Pym comes face to face with death seven times; he survives all seven of them even though the seventh near death experience is only known to the reader through the prologue and endnote. The magical number seven is used by Poe to accentuate the effect he is attempting to create. For each of the seven brushes with death, it seems that Pym's health is improving as he recuperates and as he progressively struggles through his own private hell of the seven near death experiences. This becomes obvious when Pym is deemed the healthiest of the four on board the *Grampus*, as they try to find out who amongst the four of them would have to die so that the others might survive.

Poe also brings the motif of vengeance from the beyond into the tale as Peters, Augustus, and Pym go against the mutineers in order to win back the *Grampus*. By masking himself as a member of the *Grampus* crew, who by the mutineers had been poisoned, Pym frightens the killer to death, giving himself, Augustus, and Peters the surprise momentum they need to overthrow the rest of the mutineers as revenge is obtained from the beyond through Pym in disguise (1071).

Maybe due to the novel-ish length of this story, Poe intensifies the use of symbols to accentuate the effect. Poe makes use of color to emphasize the distinction between good and evil throughout the story. The natives, who deceive the Jane Guy captain and crew, are black,

all through to their teeth, and although this might easily be explained away by a doubtful audience, Poe's continual use of the opposing colors of black and white emphasize the imagery. The dog's teeth are white, underlining his inborn kindness. The Grampus cook whom Pym calls "in all respects. . .a perfect demon" was black. Dirk Peters, whose double nature lets him participate in the mutiny as well as in the following rescue of Augustus and Pym, is half Indian.

In the end of the tale Poe re-emphasizes the image of the voyage to the underworld and also of the images of death and rebirth as they navigate through the increasingly warmer and more ferocious seas but ultimately find themselves being confronted with a cloaked human figure, much grander in its size than any other man, and with a skin color being the perfect whiteness of the snow (1179).

## *5.2. Characterization of "The Fall of the House of Usher"*

First published in 1839, the short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" belongs to one of Poe's tales of terror. In this tale Poe uses elements such as the twin cycle, the journey to the underworld, the death of the beautiful woman, anima and the shadow to build up the narrative. The twins, Madeline and Roderick, are basically two sides of one person; Madeline then signifies the anima, meaning Roderick's feminine side rather than being a real and distinct character herself. The shadow image of the twins is mirrored by the house itself.

In the case of Roderick Usher, he has secluded himself from everyone in society, but he feels the need to have someone to confide in. And thus, he decides to call upon his old childhood friend. This unnamed friend functions as both the protagonist and the narrator and lets the reader observe the action through an outsider's slightly more impartial viewpoint. With this setup Poe arranges, a reader is allowed to follow his own individual interpretations instead of having to accept either the narrator's or Roderick's explanation. As it is customary

in his tales when the supernatural is a theme, Poe also includes the possibility of the narrative being the effect of an opium dream as an idea to the reader, making it easier for the mere unimaginative reader to view the tale as a hallucination.

Poe's creation of effect is helped along by his narrator. When the narrator arrives at the House of Usher, he mentions "the melancholy House of Usher", and explains to the reader about the intense feeling, he got, the "sense of insufferable gloom" that "pervaded" his soul. He mentions "the bleak walls", the "vacant eye-like windows", and also the "utter depression of soul" which he associates with "the after-dream of the reveller upon opium" (317). Like in other cases, Poe suggests other alternative explanations for the events they are about to read about. This is a way of getting more readers to accept the premise of the tale. The alternative explanations in this case are the supernatural, the psychological, and the opium induced.

For a reader who might have trouble accepting a supernatural reading, the narrator excuses the effect, "It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression." But when looking at the scene from another perspective, he understands that the impression is far worse, and he once again mentions the "vacant and eye-like windows". Twice used, both before and after the narrator's trying to reason for his own state of mind, and all within the same page, this reference begins to manifest the house as a living object, as the shadow identity of Madeline and Roderick Usher (317-18).

Poe goes on to create an image of Roderick Usher through his account of the narrator's response to "a letter from him - which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply" (318). He explains how Roderick has expressed the state of "acute bodily illness - of a mental disorder which oppressed him - and of an earnest desire to

see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend” (Ibid.).

Next, the narrator informs the reader that even though he and Roderick had been best friends when they were young boys, he actually knows very little about the Usher family, except that “his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art (...) as well as (...) musical science.” He also comments that “the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; (...) that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always (...) so lain.” The narrator attributes the predominant knowledge of this family history with the peasantry that the “House of Usher” has ended up embodying “both the family and the family mansion” (319).

The suppressive mood adjacent to the Usher mansion and the grounds is allegedly the main cause of his “superstition” which “served mainly to accelerate the increase itself” (319). The idea that fear causes even more fear allows the narrator to explain away his ambiances because of his own imagination is playing on the mood of the mansion. Knowing this causes him to shake off the bad feeling of “what must have been a dream” (Ibid.).

After this, the narrator goes on to give a more comprehensive description of Usher’s mansion and of its state of decay. The reader learns that “no portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones” (320). The narrator concentrates on the essence of decay around the house while stressing that the general construction seems sound. Though he also suggests that perhaps a more inspecting observer would have noticed a crevice in the wall. Together with the concluding scene, where the house falls into the water, the description effectually generates the perceptions that Poe intended for the reader to have; and at the same time, it opens up for questions of interpretation which Poe uses in a lot of his

narratives.

As the narrator enters the Usher mansion, the feeling of despair follows him. He gives a short description of the interior in which he twice mentions the “ebon blackness of the floors”, and also that he had a feeling that he “breathed an atmosphere of sorrow” (321). This account is followed up with a description of Roderick Usher where he emphasizes his “cadaverousness of complexion”; and “an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison, because with Roderick Usher’s features the narrator notices such a dramatic change in his childhood friend that he voices to the reader ‘I doubted to whom I spoke’” (321). He also describes what he calls an “inconsistency” in both Roderick Usher’s actions and his tongue which differ

from vivacious to sullen, and his speech varies rapidly from a tremulous indecision (...) to that species of energetic concision - that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation - that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement. (322)

Although the reader is told that Roderick Usher firmly believes the family mansion to be perceptive, the sister, Madeline, is only mentioned fleetingly, and the narrator sees her as a mere shadowy silhouette gliding through the halls as opposed to an actual person. In fact, the narrator only sees Madeline alive once before she reemerges from her entombment to get her brother. With Madeline’s passage through the halls of the Usher mansion, a new terror is instilled in the narrator, which he afterwards eagerly is seeking release from in the face of her brother (323).

The same evening the narrator arrives at the Ushers mansion, Madeline goes to her bedroom and then she is not mentioned again until her apparent death when Roderick together with the narrator “temporarily” lock her in underneath the house in the dungeons. He then

gives a short account of the events of the few days from when he arrived and till Madeline's passing. Among other things, he tells the reader of the "long improvised dirges", Roderick's guitar playing and of Roderick's creative paintings, uttering that "if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher" (324).

Afterwards the narrator goes back to his discussion of Roderick's belief that the mansion itself possesses sentience and provides the reader a better understanding of the extent of Roderick's idea. He explains that he is lacking "words to express the full extent, or the earnest abandon of his persuasion" (Ibid.). Here, Poe strengthens the impression of the shadowy image of the mansion.

Sadly, not long thereafter, Madeline dies of her mysterious disease, and Roderick opts to keep her body in the house for fourteen days, both because of the type of illness she suffered from and because of possibility of grave robbers (328-29). The degree of Roderick's deviated mind is illustrated with him closing the tomb with Madeline inside - his twin sister, who he knows is suffering from comatose states which are practically indistinguishable from the state of death. With this, Roderick cuts himself further off from the world by removing and distancing himself from the "anima" image Madeline is.

After some grieving time for Madeline, Roderick's behavior begins to change, so much so that our narrator can't help but notice it. Roderick seems to realize that his sister is still alive, but this is not something the narrator is aware of, as Roderick does not do anything to release her from the sealed tomb (331-35). Obviously, the narrator is disturbed by Roderick's edginess and anxiety, and he finds himself "infected" with "the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (330). In fact, the narrator is so heavily influenced that he is certain his anxiety and insomnia are the consequences of said influence in combination with the "gloomy furniture of the room - of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured

into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and from upon the walls... (330).

Finally, the narrator is overwhelmed by “utterly causeless alarm”, and he begins hearing “certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals.” While the narrator walks restlessly around in his room, Roderick suddenly enters. The narrator remarks that Roderick’s “countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan - but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes - an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor.” But even in such a state, the narrator views Roderick's company as better than isolation (331).

As Roderick enters the narrator’s room, he walks directly over to the windows and throws them open to show what he has discovered. “The under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion” (331).

In an attempt to sidetrack his host from this unnerving incidence, the narrator suggests numerous logical explanations for the discovery and proposes to read the “Mad Tryst” aloud for Roderick. As the reading progresses, the narrator notices some sounds which appear to be echoing the plot of the book. At first, he is not sure if Roderick also can hear the noises, but then the narrator sees that “a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes taken place in his demeanor.” Roderick has moved his chair around, so it faces the door and is sitting “murmuring inaudibly” and swaying from one side to the other. Suddenly the noises become more and more distinct which makes the narrator jump up; Roderick, though, stays in his seat and keeps murmuring and swaying (334).

At last, the narrator is able to comprehend what Roderick has been murmuring, learning,

that not only has Roderick heard the sounds, but also that he actually has known for a while that Madeline was still alive, but he had not dared to admit it. Roderick jumps up screaming that Madeline now is right outside the doors. While saying this, the doors swing open, and Madeline appears. She momentarily stops across from them before dropping herself on top of Roderick, “and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated” (335).

Just as the narrator escapes in utter horror, he notices a bright light shining alongside the trail in the direction of the mansion, a light with a glow “of the full, setting, and blood-red moon,” now shining through the “barely discernable fissure” the same fissure the narrator spoke of early on in the tale. As the fissure gets bigger and bigger, the house of Usher collapses and as he observes “the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher” (335-36).

### *5.3. Characterization of “The Cask of Amontillado”*

“The Cask of Amontillado” was published in 1846 and is another one of Poe’s tales of terror. Poe builds this tale on the imageries of the revenge theme and the journey to the underworld.

In this tale, which is one of the rare ones that does not start out with a quotation, the narrator sees himself as the receiver of a “thousand injuries” inflicted upon his person by his future target, Fortunato. Though, the narrator explains that it was not until he “ventured upon insult” that he pledged a vengeance, stating that “at length” he will even the score, but at the same time he is most cautious not to offer his future victim any sign of his intentions. The narrator, who also goes by the name, Montressor, treats Fortunato the same way he always has in order to ensure that Fortunato has no “cause to doubt my good will” (848).

To order to get complete revenge, Montressor feels he “must not only punish, but punish with impunity.” Different from most of Poe's other murderers, this narrator does not surrender

to the imp of the perverse by going to the authorities and coming clean about his crime. While the story itself provides rather clear signs that Montessor is giving a form of confession, when he states that Fortunato is now resting in peace, something Montessor has not done himself in half a lifetime (854). Fortunato does not see anything wrong with Montessor asking him to appraise the barrel of wine. As an expert in fine wine, Fortunato is very inclined when Montessor appeals to his pride, and therefore Fortunato is persuaded into following Montessor down to the wine cellar.

Montessor's knowledge of his victim is enough to fake reluctance in pulling Fortunato away from his other arrangements and showing him the way down to the cold and clammy atmosphere of the cellars. Because of Fortunato's ego Montessor feels certain that Fortunato will insist on going with him down to the cellar to taste the wine. The symbolism here is the narrator taking the victim on a trip to the underworld, and as it is often seen in Poe's tales, the underworld is represented by the cellars.

After they start the trip down to the cellars, the two of them stop every so often to take drinking breaks, because as Montessor explains, a mouthful of wine helps to strengthen them against the clamminess. Fortunato toasts to the dead that rest around them; Montessor, ironically, toasts to Fortunato's long and healthy life. Once Montessor speaks of the immensity of the vaults, Fortunato inconspicuously insults Montessor and his family by uttering that he, in fact, does not remember the Montessor family's coat of arms. Here, Poe makes use of a scriptural reference from Genesis which mentions the garden of Eden and Eve's enticement by the snake to further suggest the actions in the culmination of the tale (Genesis 3:14-15). The coat of arms is comprised of a human foot stepping on a snake "whose fangs are imbedded in the heel" (851). The slogan on the coat of arms, "no one provokes me with impunity," further proves Poe's pattern.

Further down, as they keep descending, they walk along “walls of piled bones” intermingled with all the various wine casks. All the while, Montessor is objecting continually, claiming that they need to return back up from the cellars for the benefit of Fortunato's well-being; but, once more, Fortunato's hubris drives the both of them forward and downward. Like most mythological stories, the expedition down to the underworld and back again is the only hope for the “hero” to overcome his extreme smugness and evading his doomed fate. Regrettably for Fortunato, the narrator will realize that he cannot evade paying for his “o'erweening pride.”

With Fortunato's comment: “... you are not of the brotherhood (...) You are not of the masons”, Poe intensifies the mystique of the tale by including the forever secreted knowledge of the Freemasonry (851). And if Fortunato indeed is a member of the secret order, it would most likely be yet another reason for Montessor to envy him even more. Other signs of symbolism can be found in the wine they drink on the way down which is called “De Grave”. Here Poe is offering a prophesy of the intentions of his narrator. And it goes on. The two “travelers” journey into the vaults ends in a “deep crypt” where the air is so bad that Montessor mentions it “caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame” (852).

Throughout the tale Poe frequently calls this deepest chamber a crypt, and to the reader he tells of the skeleton bones stacked against three of the walls, a quiet testimony to the vaults' nostalgic comparison to a dungeon. By the fourth and last wall however, the skeleton bones were thrown about and now lie “promiscuously upon the earth”. This is yet another symbolic trait from Poe, where he plays with words to emphasize the many meanings of the word “promiscuous”, among others including “immoral” and “haphazard”. This picture underlines not solely Montessor's plans, but likewise the carefulness with which the crime has been prearranged by him, because underneath the skeleton bones which as mentioned were so

“carelessly” dispersed, Montresor has concealed the cement and stone which he plans to use to entomb Fortunato in the wall. He baits Fortunato by telling him that the long-awaited Amontillado wine is within the adjournment behind the fourth wall. And as soon as Fortunato enters, Montresor works fast and in a matter of seconds he has Fortunato shackled to the wall. Montresor keeps up appearances, and even as he builds the new wall to seal Fortunato's destiny, he keeps begging his victim to leave the vaults with him (854).

Fortunato's arrogance has steered him down into an underworld, from where there is no escaping, and in the case of Montresor, like many of Poe's other narrators and characters, fascination with an idea can turn into murder. Although the narrators and characters in the tales mentioned so far differ in the degree of their fascinations and illnesses, Poe uses the imageries of archetype and mythology to generate the structures that establish the basics of the tales and maintain and heighten the envisioned effect. The last story to be mentioned in this chapter is no exception.

#### *5.4. Characterization of “William Wilson”*

“William Wilson” was first published in 1840 and is one of Poe's tales of fantasy. In this particular tale, much like in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, Poe once again attends to the subject of the struggle a man can have dealing with his own conscience, and he also explores the theme of what since has come to be called the two-parted personality.

Poe has several times mentioned that the main source of inspiration for this tale is “An Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron”, which is a sketch written by Washington Irving (Hayes 117). Though, Poe's tale relates to the topic that “each man has only half a complete soul, and the pair has but one conscience, which abides wholly in the half that belongs to the whisperer” as Thomas Mabbott describes it in his introduction to the story (Mabbott 425). This subject is one Poe has frequently worked with in his writings. As is also seen in the before-mentioned

tales, he uses this same topic in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Cask of Amontillado”. In his book *The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, Stephen Peithman notices that “Poe anticipates much of what concerned the psychological movement later in the century”, but as Poe’s writings come before the great thinkers of the psychological world, Jung and Freud, the technical terms are different than the standard ones (Peithman 78). As a bibliographer of Poe, Kenneth Silverman recognizes that doubling is a fairly normal characteristic in gothic fiction. However, Silverman believes that this double in “William Wilson” and Poe's other doubles derive from Poe's unsettled sorrow from losing the three maternal women of his life and the longing for the dead to be undead or to be alive while at the same time also dead (Silverman 151).

The tale of “William Wilson” begins, as it is almost a trademark of Poe’s, with a quotation. The quote is from “Pharonnida” by Chamberlayne. “What say of it? what say of CONSCIENCE grim, That spectre in my path?” (337). This quote, like all the others, is used to validate that Poe indeed understood the components he dealt with. And as far as unreliability goes, this tale is indeed an interesting case as the protagonist in this story is of very questionable mental state.

William Wilson is the protagonist in this tale, and he is also the narrator. As is true of most people, Wilson cannot himself see the ongoing development of his character, neither can he make a distinction amid his external facade and his concealed internal personality, and the protagonist is not aware of the information Poe provides to the reader which is something the reader has grown accustomed to in Poe's tales. This absence of own perception adds to the estrangement from society.

Wilson mentions that “death approaches”, and going on he tells of “dying a victim to the horror and the mystery of the wildest of all sublunary visions”. Peithman proposes that this

proclamation may serve as some kind of death-bed revelation as in “The Cask of Amontillado” (80). Peithman could perhaps in part be right, however, Poe could also be speaking of the loss of hope for the soul as he references the imageries of half waking hallucinations, while the narrator begins to tell his tale.

When describing the school, the narrator uses the gothic principles of portrayal as he declares “the refreshing chilliness of its deeply shadowed avenues”, and utters that “the prison like rampart formed the limit of our domain” (339). Every word in this account adds to the general effect which is in accordance with Poe's stated purposes of all his works. He carries on with his portrayal by illustrating for the reader a voiced portrait of the school and explains the “extensive enclosure was irregular in form, having many capacious recesses”. Here, his account is resembling his portrayal of Roderick and Madeline Usher's house and ancestry “there was really no end to its windings - to its incomprehensible subdivisions (...) The lateral branches were innumerable – inconceivable - and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole place were not far different from pondered upon infinity” (340).

Poe's use of shadows or echoes of shadows in this tale, suggest to the reader the shadowy image in this case the double that was believed to be a twin brother of Wilson's, much alike the manner Usher's twin and the Usher mansion symbolize this same archetypical shadow image in “The Fall of the House of Usher”.

Poe carries on building up the picture of the shadow in his accounts, but not only of the shadow Wilson's look, but important details of his life, too. The shadow persona was not only born on the same day as the narrator, he also started in school on the exact same date as him. The both of them belong to the same crowd of friends and are repeated rivals. Though the narrator is commonly the public winner, he constantly feels that shadow Wilson rightly

earned the win, and the two of them are continuously on speaking terms. The narrator has a hard time describing how he feels about his double and rival even though he states that he “secretly felt that I feared him” (342).

Poe goes on developing the image of the shadow double by describing his flaws - mainly that he had trouble with one of his vocal chords which meant he was not able to speak with a normal voice. At no point would his voice be anything more than a low murmur. Wilson becomes progressively more annoyed with everything which accentuates the parallels between the two of them. With time, the similarities come to be even more noticeable as the shadow double duplicates Wilson’s walk and over-all behavior as well as his clothing style. Of his shadow double's murmur, Wilson himself comments, “it grew the very echo of my own” (344). The moral sense of the shadow double is much stronger than Wilson’s, and he uses this moral sense to offer advice, but he does so by giving hints and allusions which Wilson finds upsetting. Wilson hates the idea that his shadow double, which Wilson still sees as a rival, dares to prevent his wishes which always up to that time had been accommodated. Looking back, Wilson recognizes that he “might today have been a better and thus a happier man”, had he not declined the advice of his shadow double (345).

As Wilson’s animosity towards his shadow double increases so does his anger and hate. After this becomes clear, he comments, that he “afterwards avoided, or made a show of avoiding” his shadow double. One night, while fighting his shadow double, Wilson gets a sense of familiarity, as if having known him at some point in the ancient past even though this particular sensation swiftly disappears again. And another night, when witnessing his opponent sleeping, Wilson notices how much he looks like him, and with this being the last straw Wilson is compelled to take a leave of absence from the school (347).

Following these events, the narrator spends some time at home, and after a couple of

months he ultimately sets off to Eton. The break away from both the school and his shadow double relieves his worries and he proclaims he “could now find room to doubt the evidence” in his mind, and that the issue was rarely on his thoughts during this period of time. Once again, however, he goes back to the bad ways which habits his shadow double had warned him against. But, as Poe comments “man cannot escape himself”. Wilson’s shadow double comes back “after a week of soulless dissipation” and voicing nothing but the name “William Wilson”, and forcefully carries the past actions back to the narrator. He embarks on a quest to find out “who and what was this Wilson? - and whence came he? - and what were his purposes?” Regrettably, he is not able to get acceptable answers to his questions; he only learns that the shadow double quitted Dr. Bransby's Academy on the same day as Wilson himself left (349).

Not long afterwards, Wilson leaves to go to Oxford and yet again he finds himself at least for a little while unhindered by his shadow double. At Oxford, the shadow double reveals no sign of himself until one evening when Wilson has scammed and hustled a mate of his from school in a card game.

Once Wilson understands that his victim of cards-scramming was reputedly not the rich man he had thought him to be, he feels a touch of angst. Poe uses this moment to tell the reader how significant this is. “... the wide, heavy folding doors of the apartment were all at once thrown open, to their full extent, with a vigorous and rushing impetuosity that extinguished, as if by magic, every candle in the room” (351-52). The shadow double shows up and reveals how Wilson has cheated at the card games. Mortified and disgraced, Wilson flees from Oxford “in a perfect agony of horror and shame” (353).

Everywhere Wilson goes, the shadow double foils his plans until Wilson yet again sees no other way out than to flee. He states that “to the very ends of the earth I fled in vain” (353-

54). Wilson acknowledges that the situations the shadow double hindered “might have resulted in bitter mischief”, yet this insight does not ease his frustration and fury. At the same time, Wilson is “forced to notice” that the shadow double does not show his face at all, as Wilson explains to the reader that he “saw not, at any moment, the features of his face.” It is not important to see the face of the shadow double, since, as Wilson states, he would not “fail to recognize the William Wilson of my school-boy days, - the namesake, the companion, the rival, - the hated and dreaded rival at Dr. Bransby's” (354).

Finally, after the shadow double once again has discouraged Wilson's wishes, using his “ever-remembered, low, damnable whisper,” this time in Rome, Wilson drives the shadow double into a corner and “demands satisfaction”. Wilson triumphs and stabs the shadow double. Right after Wilson turns around to avoid an interruption. As soon as he turns back around, he notices a mirror, but in its reflection he can only see himself, “features all pale and dabbled in blood.” Yet, Wilson swears that it is in fact the shadow double, Wilson, known by the same name as himself, and that “his mask and cloak lay, where he had thrown them, upon the floor,” and realizes that “not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face ... was not, even in the most absolute identity, mine own!” At last, Wilson has challenged the shadow double and it turned out to be himself. Poe closes the tale with a monologue given by the shadow double. “You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward, art thou also dead - dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist - and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself” (357-58).

### *5.5. Characterization of “The Purloined Letter”*

“The Purloined Letter” was first published in 1844, and it belongs to the group called Poe’s tales of ratiocination. The tale is a part of Poe’s detective stories, and this one is the third and last part of the trilogy about C. Auguste Dupin.

“The Purloined Letter” is unlike the tales you would normally see from Poe's hand. It is different in the sense that nobody dies in this tale, nobody gets buried alive, and nobody goes insane which means that it is not a part of his gothic tales or of his horror stories, but instead it is a tale of reasoning and imagination, a true detective story.

The story is told by a narrator whose name remains unknown to the reader. He tells the story about his friend, C. Auguste Dupin. Dupin is the story's protagonist, and he is a true master of analyzing a situation with well-developed powers of deduction. He solves crimes by examining everything and putting himself in the criminal's place, both figuratively and literally speaking.

The narrator, who in this tale is a minor character, is, as mentioned, a close friend of Dupin. Although the narrator is a clever man, he does not have the same insight as Dupin, and he narrates the tale in a way that demonstrates his admiration for the abilities his friend possesses. This leaves the reader wondering if the narrator is indeed reliable or if his judgement is cloudy with the admiration he holds for the protagonist.

The story takes place in a small dark room in an apartment in Paris where Dupin and the narrator are hanging out, talking about the past cases Dupin has solved. The prefect, Monsieur G., from the Parisian police pays them a visit because the police wants Dupin's opinion about a current case. The prefect, in an attempt to entice Dupin, describes the case as a simple one, but yet so puzzling that the police themselves cannot solve it. The protagonist decides against participating in solving the case because it quite frankly seems like too simple a case for him to bother with. Dupin even teases the Prefect by stating, “Perhaps the mystery is a little *too plain*” (681), he suspects that the case is so simple, that the police has overlooked the simple answer.

Even though Dupin declined the case, he is still curious about it, and the Prefect provides

the details. The case is about blackmail. A letter has been stolen from a lady in a Royal apartment and is now being used for blackmailing said lady. Therefore, the police have been asked to retrieve the letter. And to top it off, the police already know who the perpetrator is. The letter had been taken by a minister who the reader only comes to know as Minister D. This is a known fact because the lady, who owns the letter, saw him take it. And at the time of the crime, because they were not alone in the room, she could not point out that he had taken it without drawing attention to the letter which needed to be kept a secret. But the police were unable to find the letter even though they had searched Minister D's home and his person, too. That is why, they need Dupin's assistance.

The narrator, who wants to be a part of it, comments of Minister D "... the letter is still in possession of the minister; since it is this possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power. With the employment the power departs" (683), meaning he probably still has the letter in his possession because it would be giving up the power if he actually had thrown the letter away. And the same would be the case if Minister D decided to use the information in the letter then he would have blown all the power he had, too. The sheer threat of the letter being exposed that is where the true power lies.

The Prefect, believing Minister D to be: "Not altogether a fool", (...) but then he's a poet, which I take to be only one removed from a fool", cannot comprehend how the perpetrator managed to hide the letter from them (684). But as Dupin later remarks: "I know him well; (...) As poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect" (691). Dupin believes that the minister cannot be considered such a fool because he succeeded in hiding the letter from the police, and moreover, he comments that actually being a poet means one would have a better imagination. Minister D is both a poet and a mathematician, and thus he can

combine both logic and creativity which gives him an edge over the police.

After a month without any luck of finding the letter, the Prefect returns to Dupin again. This time he actually offers a 50,000-franc reward to whomever can retrieve the letter. When Dupin hears about the reward, he smiles, tells the Prefect to start writing the check and hands over the letter to him. This, of course, astounds the Prefect who quickly writes Dupin a check and then rushes off to deliver the letter to its rightful owner, leaving Dupin and the narrator behind. The narrator is very curious as to how Dupin managed to retrieve the letter.

Dupin explains to the narrator, how he, whenever he faces trouble, often mimics the facial expressions of his contenders or suspects, in an attempt to comprehend what he is thinking and feeling. "I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression" (690). With this understanding of the suspects, Dupin's guess is often correct. Dupin contends that the Prefect and Parisian police do not use this approach and for that reason they were unable to locate the letter. "... the Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently (...) They consider only their own ideas of ingenuity; and in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which they would have hidden it" (690). According to Dupin, the police would only consider looking for a letter in the same places as where they might think to hide it themselves.

He goes on describing a game of brainteasers to the narrator. A brainteaser in which the first player picks out a word on a map and instructs the second player to locate the word as well. Dupin explains that amateurs always will pick the names with the fewest letters, because they think those words are the hardest to find. But actually, at least according to Dupin's logic, the hardest words to locate are the longer ones because they are extended widely across the map - making them so obvious, that people do not notice them.

This could actually explain, why the Prefect and his police force did not find the letter, because as it turns out the letter was hidden in plain sight, folded up to the size of a card and placed on a mantelpiece right beside a bunch of cards. And as it turns out Dupin has played a trick on Minister D, leaving behind a false letter in the same place as the real letter was hidden.

When the reader has finished reading the tale, he is left with yet another feeling of wonder, but this time it has nothing to do with the protagonist's or the narrator's credibility, now it is because he still has no idea what the whole case was about. Nobody knows what was written in the letter. Now, is that not ironic?

## **6. Poe's use of first-person narration**

The following chapter will focus on how Poe used the first-person narrators, and what kind of effects it created within the tales.

The chapter is divided into two subcategories. The first part investigates Poe's use of first-person narrators who at the same time function as protagonists of their stories, and the second investigates Poe's use of first-person narrators when they are not protagonists, but instead minor characters, who observe the protagonists of their respective stories.

### ***6.1. The narrator as protagonist***

As mentioned earlier, Poe had an obvious fondness for writing stories using a first person point of view. He wrote a total of sixty-five short stories – all but two of them from a first person point of view. And what is even more interesting, thirty-two of those sixty-three (meaning just a bit more than half of them) have a narrator, who also serves as the protagonist in the tale (Appendix 1). This preferred standpoint of Poe's is understandable, because it offers an intimate and undoubted perspective of the protagonist's extreme and chaotic

emotional condition, and at the same time it allows for the reader to witness the psychological processes that occurs within the character, which would not be possible with an observant character or a minor one. Those unusual, bizarre, and fantastic undertakings Poe and his fellow authors from the romantic period favored, just about cry for an eye-witness report from the person right in the middle of it, if the incredible story is to have a chance of being accepted by the audience. Poe's use of the first person appears to be a deliberate attempt to gain a willing postponement of doubt from the reader. His skills, when it comes to this matter, is unquestionable; he takes full advantage of the possibilities with first-person narration, with elements such as credibility, focus, and psychological curiosity, which hardly needs pointing out.

However, Poe's talent in turning disadvantages into advantages and also in evading some of the drawbacks of his preferred technique requires a closer look.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, the narrator needs to establish a reason for being at a certain place at a certain time. He also needs to create a situation which is plausible, counting in the factors of the narrator's mental and physical state. Besides the narrator's own words, Poe uses known devices, such as for instance, a diary, a letter or a written confession to vary the otherwise predictable situation with an oral-teller to a listener. These methods help to establish the position of the narrator and the audience and to create and obtain acceptance.

It would seem worth mentioning that out of the thirty-two stories with first-person narrating protagonists, twenty-seven of them use a written document as a device to help sell the story. Poe's widespread usage of this indirectness appears to point out that he was quite attentive to its worth regarding the narrator's stylistic credibility.

In stories where the protagonist also narrates, one of the more fragile and problematic tasks the author has is the portrayal of the narrator himself because no one rarely sees themselves as

others do. The author runs the risk of the reader rejecting the narrator and as a result will question all information the narrator gives. Poe avoids this main struggle by making almost all his main characters, who narrate, suffer with anxiety, terror, horror, melancholy and various other forms of distress as opposed to creating a perfect heroic protagonist – which through Poe's method actually makes the protagonist appear more like a normal person, as nobody is perfect. This basically consistent pattern lets Poe freely present his protagonists as people with rare psychological activities, wealthy and high social rank, refinement on the verge of borderline arrogant, and just about supernatural capabilities in observation.

It is also important to uphold a suitable sense of balance between self-absorption, reflection, and sequence of events in these kinds of stories. Poe shows a noteworthy fondness for self-scrutiny in the first-person narrating protagonists, perhaps because some of the stories are told in hindsight. But it is a balancing act making sure the reader will not grow tired of drawn-out accounts of feelings or background information before events of a suitable magnitude take over.

A lesser complicated side of a narrator's credibility is adjusting the style and manner of the narration to compliment both the personality of the narrator and the actions of the story, something Poe was undoubtedly aware of. The highlighting of a fixed result made Poe mainly focus on the narrator's tone of voice which in every one of the horrifying stories comes across as refined, distinguished and serious. The background for this prominent style is not always adequately explained by the narrator, and sometimes it leaves the reader in a sense of wonder how such a gifted person can be behind such terrible crimes. However, this wonderment is exactly what Poe strives to create, as an element of the whole effect. As a result, he effectively overcomes what could possibly have turned into a severe problem with his method of telling, meaning that Poe's protagonists write just as well as he himself can, and he does

not have to fake a manner or style he would find unnatural.

Another difficulty, this type of writing must consider, is the narrator's awareness of his audience. Poe likes to use a written manuscript as it has a habit of introducing itself and incorporates an unspecified kind of reader. By using this particular device, Poe does not have to view the reader as anything more than just that, a reader. This leaves Poe free to fully concentrate on the narrator and his story. The stories which have an explicit listener, where the narrator speaks directly to each individual reader, distract the attention of the reader, making him focus on the narrator at a given time, and thereby divert the focus away from the actual story he is narrating. At any vital point in these stories, Poe is cautious not to break the spell his narrator has over the reader. Even though the device of directly speaking to a particular reader has a much more dramatic effect, it also comes with complications, such as running the risk of the audience losing focus and missing important points. Poe, apparently, discovered these problems too and deemed the device something to avoid, as he only rarely used it.

With narration of this kind, other and more common problems and difficulties are unavoidably natural. If Poe found himself familiar with them, he opted to disregard their risks. The opinions and diversity of minor characters are given up for the narrating protagonist; and what is even more, it loses a lot of drama and casual energy. Poe's stories are missing this sort of life and warmth. His great scenes feel somewhat claustrophobic and both Poe and his narrator leave the impression that they are stuck in their own reality and that they are out of touch with the world. What Poe's stories actually is trying to say, is that literature relates only to imagination, not to actual life. In a way, one could argue that the method, Poe is so fond of, cancels out the credibility it strives to create.

Obviously, given the rather large amount of stories written by Poe's, it is beyond this

study's possibilities to examine them all. Therefore, extended examination will be restricted to only cover those, which are already presented in the chapter above. Three of the five mentioned stories are examples of the method where the protagonist also functions as the first-person narrator. The stories will be examined in chronological order, in an attempt to uncover any development in Poe's writing skills, when it comes to the use of the protagonist position. The chosen stories are *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), "William Wilson" (1840), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846).

*The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is as mentioned earlier the only completed novel written by Poe. In this novel several different problems arise with regards to the choice of narrator. In the article "Arthur Gordon Pym and the Novel Narrative of Edgar Allan Poe" written by Lisa Gitelman, the novel is called problematic. Gitelman lists three main areas, where she believes it went wrong (Gitelman 353). The first problem is amount of material, which seems to be dreary and apparently irrelevant, for example the penguin rookeries or the very long part about sea slugs. The second problem is the lack of cohesion. Gitelman explains that: "The story of the Ariel (chapter 1), the story of the Grampus (chapters 2-12) and the story of the Jane Guy (chapters 13-25) are only loosely connected to one another and even exhibit occasional contradictions" (Ibid.). The last of the three mentioned problems is about the ending of the novel. She finds the ending problematic because it ends anticlimactically and with a bit of a conundrum, too, because: "The reader is left with the indistinct image of a huge white figure rising from the Antarctic sea and learns in the concluding editorial "Note" that Pym is dead and his remaining chapters lost, despite the fact that the "Preface" had him alive and well very near the time of publication" (Ibid.). So, what is the reader supposed to think?

Gitelman is not the only one who has found the ending in particular to be troublesome.

Ronald C. Harvey, who is the author of the book, *The Critical History of Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym: A Dialogue with Unreason*, has mentioned it, too. He states that several of the problems, he has come across, stem from the uncertainty of the narrative structure. While there can be no doubt as to who is the protagonist of the story - it is after all right there in the title – however, it is rather confusing who the actual narrator is.

In most studies that address the frame, one finds either assumptions or arguments about the significance of the relationship between the two chief narrators, Pym himself, and the 'Mr. Poe,' author of the first three and one half chapters. Ostensibly, the 'preface,' 'by' Pym, stands as an explanation for the first chapters' appearance in two issues of the *Southern Literary Messenger* the previous year, 1837, under the name of 'Poe.' (This, of course, was true: Poe had published installments in the January and February numbers while he was Assistant Editor at the *Messenger*.) But rather than ignore this potential confusion, or handle it in some inconspicuous way, Poe exploits it, drawing attention to the relationship by accumulating layer upon layer of irony. Pym tells us he was reluctant to tell his true story, certain that the 'positively Marvelous' incidents will be taken as 'imprudent ... fiction'. (Harvey 6)

The reader is informed that the character, Mr. Poe, believed the story was true the first time Pym shared it with him, but then again he also admits that he wrote the opening part of the narrative using his own words and writing his personal name in the byline, and calling it fiction. Paradoxically, Pym then mentions that the reader actually reacted with gullibility and in fact believed the story to be true, exactly as the character of Mr. Poe had foretold. And therefore, Mr. Poe uses this as a confirmation that Pym should have faith in the people's judgement and reasoning to accept his story as true.

Harvey, much like Gitelman, also goes on to point out that the problem with the narration continues right up till the last page of the story. He states:

In yet another ironic twist, we learn in the appended ‘Note’ from a third narrator, presumably another editor, that ‘Mr. Poe’ will not cooperate in supplying the missing information of the abortive narrative, because he has changed his mind, and does not believe in the ‘entire truth’ of the later chapters. Thus we apparently have from the real author an oblique, half-confession to his readers – after they have read it – that the narrative is imaginary, and that he has hoaxed them. In a final layer of irony, both the elaborate ruse and the confession prove supererogatory, since both the convoluted ‘Preface’ and the fantastic narrative are incredible on their face, just as Pym had feared. Indeed, despite long-lived rumors, there is no evidence that a significant number of critics or other readers took it as a true account. (Harvey 7)

So with now three different narrators in the story, it is no wonder that some readers might be a little confused about what is going on. But perhaps this is exactly what Poe intended.

In the article, “Edgar Allan Poe and the Author-Fiction: The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket”, Ki Yoon Jang discusses, among other things, how the narrators in the story can be explained. He comes up with a rather alternative but also interesting idea.

According to Jang:

... it will become clear, Poe's author-figure resembles a ghost, a presence that is not self-determined and self-evident but determined and evidenced by the interpretive responses of its witnesses (...) the surge of various speculations on Poe's "character" right after his mysterious death has in effect realized his vision of the perpetually reinterpreted and reimagined author through readers in his own ghostly state. (Jang 357)

At first, this idea of the narrating ghost seemed rather farfetched, but if you think about some of the other of Poe's works, in particular the gothic stories, where death, resurrection and mystic are somewhat regular occurrences, the thought of a narrating ghost does not seem out of place. And it would explain some of the bizarre things about the shift in narration, like the remaining and untold chapters after Pym's death. But even then it is very doubtful if this

angle will help the reader believe the story to be true.

John Tresch addresses in his article, “The Compositors Reversal: Typography, Science, And Creation In Poe’s Narrative Of Arthur Gordon Pym”, the reader’s trust in the story’s credibility, and discusses how Poe uses artistic effects to make the story, at the very least, appear a little bit realistic. Tresch explains that:

throughout the book, ‘Pym’ acknowledges that he is relating ‘incidents of a nature so entirely out of the range of human experience, and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter hopelessness of obtaining credence’ (...) To counter this suspicion of disbelief, the narrative adopts the rhetoric of facts, observation, and general information throughout. (Tresch 16)

Tresch goes on to explain what kind of effect the use of these elements will have on the story. “These tokens of factuality, offered “for the information of those readers who have paid little attention to the progress of discovery” (...) help secure an impression of reality - even as the book takes on a more distinctly *supernatural* cast in its second half” (Tresch 17). Thus, according to Tresch, the story manages to gain some credibility by the use of facts and by providing both information and observation, even in spite of some of the more supernatural events.

But what is the point of Pym’s story? Why did Poe write this novel? These questions lead us back to Lisa Gitelman, because she has a quite fascinating opinion about Poe’s message. She believes that: “Poe’s novel mocks the exuberance for exploration voyages and voyage accounts that gripped America in the 1830s, an enthusiasm inflamed by the desire to compete with British naval exploration and the global reaches of British empire” (Gitelman 350). So according to Gitelman, Pym’s adventure should be seen as a ridicule against all the “hype” about exploration of unknown places of the Earth.

And much like Tresch does in the aforementioned paragraphs, Gitelman also looks into

Poe's use of facts and observation to heighten credibility and to blur out the lines between fact and fiction.

The 1838 title page to *Pym* carries a similarly comprehensive title, promising mutiny, butchery, shipwreck, suffering, massacre, and 'incredible adventures and discoveries' below the eighty-fourth parallel. Poe delivers all but this last. The eighty-fourth parallel is the margin of Poe's fiction, and this margin is never crossed. To pass between fiction and fact Poe must presume more knowledge than his readers possess of the Antarctic. But Poe could know nothing of a region where, in reality, no one had ever been before, and his refusal to invent below eighty-four degrees anchors the novel within the hazy confines of a region where fiction reaches the edge of fact. (Gitelman 352)

It is interesting that Poe did not capitulate and decided to invent a fantasy world in a part of the world where no one had been before. But then again, the story would suffer even more with its credibility, when that part of the world was discovered and Poe's vision did not match.

As mentioned earlier, Gitelman had three problems with *Pym*'s story, the amount of irrelevant material, the lack of cohesion, and the anticlimactic ending; but despite these problems, she still believes the novel was a success. "Although some critics consider *Pym* a flawed novel on the basis of these three problematic features, it is exactly these features that signal the success of the novel as a fictional comment on the varied and popular literature of exploration" (Gitelman 353). So the novel works as a rather ironic comment on the already existing literature on the subject *Pym*'s narrative works, regardless of the problem areas.

Gitelman continues her defense of *Pym*'s story, claiming that the narration structure was actually a conscious choice made by Poe, and all the critics are viewing the novel wrongly. She states:

Pym's adventure is not incomplete; his narration is. Such absence may indeed be Poe's point. (...) the character of the narrator is all that stands between the reader

and "the facts," yet the narrator proves an ultimate frustration. (...) The frustrations of his novel are exaggerated depictions of the frustrations that exploration literature presented to early nineteenth-century readers. Critics who seek the curves of a well wrought urn may search much of Poe's novel in vain, because the quality of Poe's work lies not in its integrity of form but in its response to form. One measure of the complexity in Poe's understanding of literary form is the extent to which Pym suggests a dialogue between voices of fiction and fact. (Gitelman 360-361)

The point, Gitelman makes here, is interesting. It is not about Poe (or any other author) being true to the standard literary form, it is much more about how Poe (and others) react to the form, and what they do with it. And then leaving it up to the reader to make sense of it.

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* plays with both fact and fiction, as established by several scholars demonstrated here. This is probably why the story still has a sense of something modern in it. In the 1990's, when Gitelman wrote her article, "infotainment" was a rather new term. But she still saw Pym's story would fit in. "Like that hybrid of modern media, "infotainment," the novel narrative of Edgar Allan Poe asks to be true and false at the same time, preying boisterously on an audience receptive to gestures of conventionality" (Gitelman 361). And in 2020 it is no different.

"William Wilson" written in 1840 is, as mentioned, the tale about the narrating protagonist, William, who struggles so very much with his conscience – so much that his conscience develops as a shadow double to William, following in his every footstep and driving him insane. As the reader it can be a rather large challenge to understand what this shadow double person is all about. But Valentine C. Hubbs defines it very clearly in her article, "The Struggle of the Wills in Poe's 'William Wilson'", with the help of Carl Jung's theory of shadows (Jung 21). Hubbs states:

The key to the understanding of Wilson's double lies in the Jungian concept of the shadow. The shadow forms a large part of the contents of the personal unconscious and has its universal aspects in the collective. It consists of undifferentiated functions and repressed characteristics which are not compatible with the lifestyle of the conscious ego. Like all archetypes the shadow may be positive or negative, depending upon the attitude of the conscious ego, for the shadow, as part of the unconscious, is regarded by Jung as a compensatory structure. The purpose of such compensation is the maintenance of a balanced psyche, a psyche in which both consciousness and the unconscious function in harmony. For the ego to assimilate the contents of the unconscious and to attain this desirable harmony, the shadow must first be met and recognized as part of one's own psyche. Failure to achieve this will result in repression and the absorption of more energy (libido) into the shadow archetype. In other words, the shadow, if repressed, will continue to grow and, because it lives its own autonomous existence in the unconscious, it will manifest itself in the personality whenever consciousness is not on guard against it. The result will be psychic disharmony and, if repression continues over an extended period, a probable neurosis. (Hubbs 74)

From this knowledge it is obvious that the protagonist is struggling with his subconscious and because he also functions as the narrator, the reader is kept in the dark about who exactly the shadow double is, simply because neither the protagonist nor the reader have access to the minor character's knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, the use of this type of narrator concept is often connected to unreliability and irony, and this tale is no exception. In "William Wilson", one can find many rather unreliable points and also many examples of the irony, all linked to the first-person narrating protagonist. Hubbs also addresses this in her article:

Ironically, the positive traits reposing in the shadow are precisely what Wilson One requires to achieve a healthy psychic development. Thus every time that Wilson one is able to best his rival, he is plunged into greater conflict: "we had, to

be sure, nearly every day a quarrel in which, yielding me publicly the palm of victory, he, in some manner contrived to make me feel that it was he who had deserved it ... (Hubbs quoting Poe 306-307, in Hubbs 76)

Obviously, the protagonist is unaware that he is actually the one making the shadow double more powerful, and this is because of this quandary where people do not see themselves as other people see them. From an outside perspective the reader notices the problem; though perhaps not at first, but during the course of the tale.

The level of irony reaches its peak at the end of the tale with the protagonist's own destruction, when he murders his shadow double. Hubbs calls it a paradox that the only thing Wilson gained from killing the enemy, was his own annihilation.

Wilson One killed his counterpart in order to free himself from him forever. Ironically and paradoxically, this violent act of repression resulted only in his own psychic destruction. The disturbing Wilson he thought to eliminate now manifests himself in the neurotic personality of Wilson One, not as a healthy complement to a harmoniously functioning psyche, but rather as a morbid, self-punitive, and distorted element. (Hubbs 78)

This indeed is ironic that when you try to help or stop a bad situation, you instead end up making things much worse which is something that most people can relate to in some way or another.

In the article, "Who's Master in the House of Poe? A Reading of 'William Wilson'", written by Thomas Joswick, it is commented that the use of irony is taken to another level in this tale. He ponders whether the irony in fact is based on the reader as opposed to being based on the protagonist. Joswick's thoughts are these:

Yet if the tale's manifest allegory sustains the reader's sense of mastery, "William Wilson" also holds in reserve an irony by which that mastery might become suspect (...) The reader depends for his sense of mastery on the figuration of his double, the one whose ethical failure is signified by a lack of a certain kind of

linguistic mastery. And since it is a part of the confounding nature of doubles to reverse cause and effect, this reserved irony of the tale, if brought forward, could make for a disturbing question: what if Poe's story is really about how a reader's linguistic mastery of ethical tales such as this one signifies his own ethical dilemma? What if Wilson's failure, in some perverse way, is the figure for the reader's failure? (Joswick 227)

This is a rather provocative statement, however, there might be some truth to it. If Poe's message with this tale is to demonstrate the ironic twists of life, and how people need to listen to their subconscious in order to live a life in balance then it would be a true Poesque thing to do, to tease the reader a bit by leaving behind an imagery which basically lets him know he, too, has failed the test if he has not caught on what was going on with Wilson.

With Wilson as the protagonist, Poe takes a risk. The more likable a character appears, the more the audience is prone to emphasize with him, especially when the character is the protagonist. As Joswick puts it: "But Wilson is a pretentious and conceited snob who lacks a proper regard for others" (Joswick 227). It is chance to take to use a narrating protagonist who is downright obnoxious and loathsome. But this, too, could be seen as a test from Poe because it is easy to like a nice and good guy, it is much more difficult to have sympathy for the opposite.

Going back to the beginning of the tale, it becomes more clear why this prolonged opening was necessary. The reader needs to know that the narrator's death is imminent, and that he challenges the reader to understand the tale. Joswick also mentions that the reader should know that in Wilson's eyes, everything happening in his life is the result of antagonistic powers conspiring to get him. Joswick states:

He says that he tells his story now as he approaches death because he desires the sympathy of his fellow men, and he explains that he hopes to obtain the sympathy by persuading his readers that he has been, 'in some measure, the slave of

circumstances beyond human control.’ He encourages his readers to do even more than he apparently can himself: master the story, he says in effect, and ‘seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error’ (p.427). This is not a cunning strategy to excuse his crimes; this is an admission of a genuine perplexity (which we naturally read as his obtuseness), not so much about what he killed by killing Wilson (though it is that too), but about why it is that he found himself at murderous odds with what or (were this possible to say) in what his own identity was bound. This opening strategy is prolonged in the story by Wilson's inclination to call his life a ‘drama’ and, consequently, to regard his clothing often as a costume and the events of his life as a complex plotting of antagonistic forces that culminates in a ‘last eventful scene’ (p. 446). (Joswick 233)

This way of including the reader in the tale, asking him to try to figure out what is going on, is a way of intensifying the tale; yet perhaps it could also be a technique of Poe’s to help remove some of the focus from a narrating protagonist, who does not seem of sound mind. This way, the audience is focused on figuring out the story, and the fact that the narrator is not exactly what one would deem reliable takes a step back from the attention span. But the downside of this method is that by letting the reader take part in it, it is safe to say that the end results could vary a great deal, as Joswick also brings up.

Is there any way to show the necessity of Wilson’s truth? Not in any direct way and not to everyone's satisfaction, since the story encourages its readers to feel a sense of mastery over Wilson’s doubleness and thereby to feel free and autonomous in comparison to a character who seems so hopelessly bound and obtuse. (Joswick 233)

The way the reader might end up feeling superior towards Wilson could cause him to overlook the important points of the tale.

It is rather typical for Poe’s stories to challenge the reader’s understanding of the tales,

which makes one think that perhaps this redirection of attention is Poe's way of controlling the story while having an ulterior motive of keeping the reader confused. Joswick mentions that Poe's stories always have two sides, and there is no way of knowing which one you have come across.

The various sense of mastery (which, to repeat, Poe's story all the time encourages) diverge recognition of the reader's own complicity and the tragic necessity that Wilson stands for in such bold and emblematic ways, so that the fiction itself both permits clear moral judgments and preserves certain blindness. In the House of Poe (like Dr. Brandby's, 'A place of enchantment!'), there are always two stories and it is impossible to say with certainty upon which one we happen to be, for the way we inhabit that house (by thinking we are mastering it) is the very way we sustain and perpetuate the truth from whose tragic necessity we want always to be shielded (...). Instead, it may be that Poe is trying to show the limits of our ethical lives and language, what boundaries there are to the domain of good and evil which we inhabit. (Joswick 238)

By telling the tale through the protagonist himself, the tale becomes penetrating and forceful. The reader experiences first-hand what mental struggles Wilson goes through, and while he is not a classical "darling" among protagonists, the reader can still learn from him. In this case, as Joswick suggests, that all people inhabit both good and evil, and our virtuous lives come with limitations, but in the end it is all about the balance between good and evil, between right and wrong.

For the typical reader, the most extraordinary tales in the group of protagonists, who also functions as narrators, are perhaps the tales where the protagonists suffer from anxious and sometimes rather twisted minds and psychoses to match. Poe has several prominent tales that fit into this category; and, obviously, the protagonist's perspective is perfectly suited for the matter. This secretive, unpredictable, and overwhelming psychological force drives all the narrating protagonists with a lawbreaking side. However, the narrators in these tales often

expose themselves in various ways; some do it unintentionally, but others do it deliberately, as in the aforementioned tale of “William Wilson”. Others again attempt to convince the reader that they had been wronged and offended and want to impress the audience with their exceptional funds and wealth, as it is the case in the next tale.

“The Cask of Amontillado” from 1846 is one of the later works from Poe’s hand, and for long it has been celebrated as one of Poe’s masterpieces, as critics call it “a . . . perfect embodiment of all the principles of short-story writing Poe had taught the world” (Alterton 110). Here the narrator, Montresor, now an old man, tells the tale about how he, half a century ago, avenged the insults put upon him and his family’s name, whether factual or imaginary. He does so by tempting his abuser to go down into the crypts and wine cellars, which lie underneath his family manor and there entombing him behind a brick wall and leaving him to die. The tale includes a ruthless murder and a narrator, who acts within an eccentric but not entirely enlightened urge to share and re-experience his awful crime.

Stephen L. Mooney, who wrote the article “Poe’s Gothic Waste Land”, comments on how Poe’s writing style is irony by claiming: “His mode is irony. The serious disguises of so many of the tales that are comic in origin, and the comic disguises of the serious, are his ratiocinative discovery of himself as Eiron” (Mooney 281)<sup>3</sup>. The irony in “The Cask of Amontillado” seems rather obvious, however, it is thought to be both piercing and more inescapable than what has been seen in some of Poe’s earlier works; it demonstrates, beyond any doubt, Poe’s very significant improvement in skill and complexity. The narrator, old Montresor, is rather noticeably trying to impress his audience positively. He describes his daring act committed fifty years earlier with delight; with a bizarre combination of blatant

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<sup>3</sup> Eiron – “a stock character in Greek comedy, who pretends to be less intelligent than he really is, and whose modesty of speech contrasts with the boasting of the stock braggart. Irony derives from the pretence adopted by the *eiron*” (Eiron - Oxford reference).

smugness and sickening, groveling modesty; and, on top of everything else, with a taste of dramatic effect which especially highlights, the cold, ingenious shrewdness he used to go about getting his vengeance. The style of narration works as powerfully on the audience as the tale itself does and they work in smooth harmony. The inescapable irony comes with the circumstance that Montresor is generating just the opposite result for his audience (or more precisely: the reader) than what he actually wishes to create and believes he is creating.

Besides this, Montresor does another thing that is not done a lot by Poe's narrators, as is pointed out by Marvin Feldheim in his article, which shares its title with the story. Montresor tells the story with dramatic effects. There are several times in the dialogue where he appears to copy Fortunato's tone of voice and manner of speech, and he also seems to perform his own personal role in the situation. "In the beginning Fortunato (...) mimics Montresor with his repeated 'Amontillado!' but by the end the roles are reversed and Montresor plays the mimic, as Fortunato approaches the edge of madness, the mad Montresor re-echoes his yells" (Feldheim et al. 447). He gives the interaction between Fortunato and himself life right in front of the audience. Out of all the storytellers Poe has created, Montresor is easily the most dexterous and fascinating one, and his talent symbolizes the development of Poe's authorship.

Poe's carefulness in "The Cask of Amontillado" has been rightly acclaimed. Poe had, at this point, noticed that many readers enjoyed being fooled by an author. As a result, in "The Cask of Amontillado" not much attention is put towards credibility and truth. The narrating protagonist basically behaves and speaks like he could not possibly imagine anyone would be asking questions about his accuracy, and as the fact of the matter is, no one ever does. Consequently, Poe eliminates a lot of heavy, obvious details regarding Montresor and his character and instead he focuses on increasing the tempo and alertness of the tale.

Furthermore, Poe's well-organized usage of symbolism and contrasts has been mentioned

by several academics and critics. The excessive acclaim given to this tale as an impeccable piece of artwork has actually dared the reader to find faults in the short story, any faults, even if they are only miniscule. In one case, for instance, a critic is doubtful of whether or not Fortunato understands that that punishment is because of his affiliation with the masonry.

Fortunato's taunt is our first hint about the nature of this longstanding insult. Deep in the vaults he laughs and throws a bottle 'upwards with a gesticulation,' a 'grotesque' movement. The action, admits Fortunato, indicates that he is 'of the brotherhood,' 'of the Masons.' Here is insult enough to the proud Montresor (...) If being a Mason is Fortunato's crime, does he comprehend the enormity of his deviation and the consequent punishment?' (Feldheim et al. 448).

Another critic believes the story to be a questionable Christian allegory with Fortunato as a symbol of Christ and Montresor as a sort of wandering Jew.

Fortunato wears, we will say, a crown of bells for a crown of thorns; (...) The wine (...) its non-existence parodies by inversion the ritual significance of the communion service; and (...) Montresor, who, having lived for fifty years with the crime in his mind, displays vague affinities with the Wandering Jew. (Feldheim et al. 448)

And yet another proposes that the real irony, in fact, is Poe telling the story of Fortunato's vengeance on Montresor. Several of these analytical suggestions are as strange as some of the tales Poe himself have come up with.

However, this story can be challenged on the element of psychological realism, of credibility, and this element concerns the problematic task of portraying the first-person narrator and the person he is telling the story to. Poe presents the circumstance in which Montresor, fifty years earlier, perpetrated the gruesome crime and is now as an elderly man sharing his tale. In a sense, Montresor's icy, triumphant and obsessive manner comes across even more horrifying because of his old age; on the other hand, the sheer intensity and enthusiasm of his tale causes him to seem as in agony, from the very moment he begins

narrating, reliving the paranoia that absorbed him fifty years before. If the reader looks at Montresor attentively, he most likely cannot avoid questioning whether, ever since the leading cause was eliminated, if this state of paranoia has been persistently ongoing for the past fifty years and also, if it indeed has been ongoing, whether other terrible - possibly even more terrible – situations, which Poe left unmentioned, has been the outcome. To put it another way, is “The Cask of Amontillado” perhaps simply a primary example of what Montresor has on his conscience?

One could also ask the question of why the old Montresor suddenly decides to disclose his crime, especially when he has seen so many years go by in silence. Essentially, Poe proposes an answer, however, the proposition is indeed so vague that it appears to have been left undetected even by the critics with miniscule detail-oriented observations. Because in the third line of the tale, the narrator, Montresor, is directly addressing his listener, when he says, “You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat” (848). Here the point is that if the particular listener knows the nature of Montresor’s soul well, then the listener has to be a person who is fairly close to him, meaning a person who knows Montresor well. And because family pride is a thing of considerable importance to him, the listener might very well turn out to be a family member. On the other hand, seeing as Montresor explicitly brings up his soul and later rounds off his tale with a religious blessing, the framework surrounding the story would, then, indicate that Montresor’s speech could function as a confession and that would allocate the listener to the role of a priest in a confessional. With this interpretation, the irony is that what might possibly have been envisioned as unpretentious remorse instead ends up being shameless arrogance, of which the fate of the narrator’s soul surely will be sealed - just as surely as Fortunato’s fate was sealed by the narrator himself.

In spite of the uncertainties and in spite of the interpretations laid upon this tale, the argument of this reading is that the abandonment of lengthy details instituting credibility which Poe chose, is very well compensated for by the improvement in theatrical ferocity and with the involvement of the reader. There is no question that Poe deliberately retains ambiguousness on several key points in the tales with the purpose of encouraging the audience's imagination as an alternative to loading it full of details. "The Cask of Amontillado" is still everything that the tale's utmost positive critics have acknowledged it to be.

### *6.2. The narrator as a minor character*

In fifteen of Poe's tales the narrator is a minor character (Appendix 2). Out of Poe's authorship are these tales rated among the most extraordinary and successful by critics. It is also in this category the tales of ratiocination can be found. Poe created this type of tale and believed it to be very captivating and evolving for his writing skills. According to J. Gerald Kennedy, who wrote the article "The Limits of Reason: Poe's Deluded Detectives", Poe did something new to the literary world: "Poe's tales of ratiocination provide a revealing counterpoint in their idealization of reason and sanity" (Kennedy 184). With a good portion of reasonableness, it would be fair to call Poe the originator of the contemporary detective story, and the techniques behind the stories has not been noticeably improved upon since Poe demonstrated his skills in the renowned tales "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt", and "The Purloined Letter" (Ibid.). The inspiration from these masterpieces is obvious in today's world of the popular top secret agents and heroic spies, like for instance Jason Bourne, James Bond or the whole Marvel universe. The reader gets their pleasure by admiring a person who is capable of overcoming all possible problems and hindrances, solve the most extreme mysteries, and stay dignified and prepared in the hardest

situations. Furthermore, some of the charm are found in the answer to a paradox, a brainteaser, which calls for logical knowledge and observational dexterity far beyond what would constitute normalcy.

When it comes to the choice of narrative, the praise goes to Poe because he noticed how significant it could be to let the narrator be a minor character and leave it up to him to introduce the audience to the detectives and ratiocinations. These protagonists hold astonishing investigative powers, but if they were to talk about themselves and their special skills they would, most likely, come across as either arrogant or loaded with fabricated modesty - hence, the narrating minor character to the rescue. This indirect technique, Poe uses to portray his detectives, is a verification of his creative brilliance.

Narrating by the means of a minor character is not as simple a process or as apparent as it may seem. Both benefits and complications can be found when placing a character who is not the protagonist in the tale as the first-person narrator, particularly when it comes to upholding credibility and letting the narration gain acceptance. As is also the case with the narrating protagonist-tales, it is more convenient to investigate the fruitful outcome of Poe's techniques rather than to rummage after which hitches were conquered and which were not.

With this type of narration, the key advantage to be attained, as also mentioned earlier, is the evasion of the struggles an author might encounter by having a protagonist narrate his own superlative intellect and the prosperous undertakings that follow. But on the other hand, it also leaves him with every benefit when it comes to credibility obtained by a participant, standing right in the middle of all the action, but without having any crucial part in the result. The protagonist's emotional exploits would generally be rather difficult to believe without another person there to observe them; consequently, the authenticity of the protagonist is increased when introduced by another character in the tale, as Carolyn Wells also brings up in

her book *The Technique of the Mystery Story*. She explains what Poe gained from this technique:

By this seemingly simple device Poe doubled the effectiveness of his work, because this unobservant and unimaginative narrator of the unraveling of a tangled skein by an observant and imaginative analyst naturally recorded his own admiration and astonishment as the wonder was wrought before his eyes, so that the admiration and astonishment were transmitted directly and suggestively, to the readers of the narrative. (Wells, ch. 9)

According to Wells, she believes this method of narration has more than one advantage, when she says: "... this means of narration has another decided advantage. Since the detective confides in his friend or not, as he chooses, the author can reveal or conceal facts as he chooses, and so mislead the reader at will. What the subordinate does not know he can not tell, and thus is the secret preserved" (Wells, ch. 13.5). However, this could also be turned around and into a rather significant, and occasionally crippling, imperfection, because this technique ensures that the protagonist can only be perceived from an outside perspective, which means that the minor character is not able to access the protagonist's mind and, thus, cannot convey precisely what the main character is pondering and feeling – at least not with any kind of confidence or trustworthiness. The narrating minor character is a drawback in those tales where perception of complicated emotional situations and the deep passionate feelings are essential to the overall effect. It would appear as if Poe is well aware of this possible drawback as he is very cautious of his protagonist staying calm and collected and turning the reader's attention towards the rationality of the tale rather than emotional side of it.

The author comes across an additional risk when choosing the minor character's viewpoint, which is the description of him as the narrator. Like the other characters, he, too, needs to be assigned particular qualities, but because this narrator is not the center of attention, the author

must be cautious that he does not outshine or undermine the character whose experience is being narrated. It can quite easily occur that the lavish appreciation and modest behavior of the narrating minor character end up contrasting the superiority, irritation, or brazen self-assurance of the psychologically oversized character who is the protagonist of the story. Any such contrast will serve as a disadvantage and make it more difficult to get the protagonist accepted as a character deserving of the reader's empathy and devotion. The risk is that the audience will favor the narrating minor character more than the protagonist.

A smaller, but occasionally difficult, hitch when dealing with a first-person narrator, who only functions as a bystander, can be how to get the narrator into the various situations and locations in order for him to observe the things he has to voice to the reader later on. This arranging needs be done wisely so there can be no question of the trustworthiness and character of the narrator. It should be both plausible and likely to find the narrator present at a scene, but on the hand, if it requires too much effort to get him positioned, it might divert the reader's attention from the activities of the protagonist. In addition, the author also needs to be cautious not to characterize his narrator as a voyeur. Altogether, it would seem as the choice of a minor character as the narrator is a rather complicated one.

It was somewhat late in Poe's career when this group of stories was written and they are in themselves a sign of how Poe has evolved as an author. As examples of the dexterity required, two tales have been selected for further discussion. They are "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Purloined Letter". Both tales have been introduced in a before-mentioned chapter.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" from 1839 finds its place among Poe's other fiction alongside "The Cask of Amontillado" as a near flawless model of Poe's skillfulness. The tale has been featured and published in numerous anthologies and it is mentioned more than any other of Poe's distinctive works, with the potential exclusion of "The Raven". The tale of

pain, misery and the death of a melancholic, obsessed protagonist, who is borderline insane, is narrated by a friend of the protagonist.

In this group of tales, where protagonists like Dupin is found, Roderick Usher appears a bit misplaced; he has more shared features with the troubled narrating protagonists of “William Wilson” and “The Cask of Amontillado”. It seems strange that Usher did not tell the story himself, seeing as this story is commonly believed to be the utmost effective dealing with madness from Poe's hand. Exactly how can it be possible for a spectator to witness the incredible anguish, which Usher endured, being both emotional and psychological, and then re-count the experience so vividly and strikingly?

With the use of a narrating minor character, Poe accomplishes two effects most readers would find appealing. The first thing is the narrating position, which is more impartial. Rather than participating in the protagonist's chaotic mind, the reader is invited to witness the intense undertakings of a disordered mind. Alongside the narrator, the reader is asked to use his imagination to the fullest extent in order to fill in missing pieces. In this position the reader is kept slightly more distant from the uncomfortable theme of the tale. The second thing is that from the angle of the narrating minor character, the reader is able to get a better sense of both the horror and reflected empathy that the protagonist's madness should rightly induce. In the case of narrating protagonists, the reader might possibly get a little too close to the main characters, who are various types of madmen; this could cause the reader to be too stunned, spellbound and horrified to be appropriately understanding. However, at no point in “The Fall of the House of Usher” does the reader get the feeling that Usher, the protagonist, is an evil monster; quite the opposite actually, through involvement in the attentiveness and compassion of the kind narrator, the reader will be likely to experience both horror and pity equally. The tale of the Usher family is both terrifying and sad at the same time; it stirs up something

regarding a person's morals. Most likely, in spite of all its grotesque babbles, this is the reason why "The Fall of the House of Usher", continues to be one of Poe's most popular tales among readers of all types.

In this tale, Poe's main challenge is to uncover his protagonist's internal suffering, keeping in mind that we are dealing with a protagonist, who is characterized as a rather reserved person, and a narrator who is observing and interacting with him. Poe achieves this by expressive suggestion, for instance Roderick Usher's edgy body language, his many declarations of anxiety and torment, his mythical interests and actions, the beauty and the unruliness of his imagination, as showed in both his music and poems, but also in the complexity of his gloomy desolation. It is the romantic classic poesque hero personified here by Usher. Sure, he is mad, but in a striking and interesting way. A lot of the cause of this marvelous effect is owed to the manner in which Poe sharply overcomes one of the foremost weaknesses of this technique.

Among Poe's accomplished detective stories "The Purloined Letter" from 1845 stands out as a true jewel, nearly as famous and well-regarded as "The Fall of the House of Usher". The protagonist employs the creative observation of important regularities which according to Poe is significant for both art and science. Instinct pushes the trivialities away and attaches a structure that develops as the vital details are put together. The whole point of the tale is that the world needs both a poet's imagination and a mathematician's reasoning in order to see things in their entirety. The culprit of "The Purloined Letter" manages to successfully hide the stolen object from the authorities as he is both a poet and a mathematician. Detective Dupin succeeds in finding the secret hiding place as he too is both a poet and a mathematician.

In this concluding respect, the narrator and his behavior should also be examined. First of all, Poe instantaneously presents the unusual relationship which exists between the narrating

minor character and the protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin. Sitting together in Dupin's library, they spend an hour in “profound silence”, thinking of mysteries and murders; or at least, the reader is told, that the narrator was contemplating this topic (680). Such an exceptionally comprehensive spiritual union should be satisfactory merit for the kind of unity that would solidify a soundly dependable narrator as the informer on issues relating to Dupin's virtuosity.

In the next phase, the narrator needs to familiarize the reader with the police and their ineffectiveness. This is done rather theatrically by the narrator through the comments he makes to the Prefect when he stops by. The narrator's comments determine his lacking insight and his subordination to Dupin. While witnessing this scene, Dupin stays perfectly well-mannered; even in a much greater sense than the narrator, who rather grumpily demands the Prefect to “Be a little more explicit” (681). This is an important point that needs to come out, because this goes to ensure that the reader's empathy will stay entirely where it is supposed to be – with the protagonist, as the narrating minor character should not outshine the protagonist. However, Dupin undeniably becomes increasingly more sarcastic towards the Prefect later on, but even then his sarcasm still has a comical and “a sparkle in the eye-ish” aspect that does not harm the detective's personality.

In the end of the tale after Dupin has found the letter and has handed it over to the Prefect, the narrator voices his absolute amazement and admiration regarding Dupin's abilities. Thereafter he dedicates the remaining part of the tale to Dupin's explanation of how he was able to find the letter which is structured as a dialogue between Dupin and the narrator. In fact, the narrator does almost nothing else but account for his conversations word for word, his amazement, and also his respect for Dupin, and all these points are well described throughout the tale. An interesting thing about this tale and its narrating structure is the ingenuity used by Poe to make Dupin's talents and willpower become clear through dialogue.

The reader focusses on him and the narrator is so far in the background of the reader's attention-span that he is nearly overlooked.

Like with the tale of "The Cask of Amontillado", it appears pointless to complain about the loss of reliability, which is imbedded in this narrative technique. Of course, one might wonder how it is possible for a narrator to recreate such a long conversation, as the length of the tale is around fifteen pages, and do so with such precision and thrill. Also similarly, as with "The Cask of Amontillado", not much time and energy is wasted founding the credibility of neither the narrator, nor of Poe's intentions with the tale, or even his thoughts of the audience. Poe's energy is cleverly spent on perfecting the dialogues and words his characters utter. He has a special way of making his characters come to life by the way of their words, and he is counting on the reader to see past the lack of full disclosure of all details.

Even though narrating through a minor character is a very complicated method, Poe makes it look easy, avoiding most of the traps that could have "broken the spell" of the tales. At no point does the narrating minor character outshine the protagonist, and the reliability of the narrator appears less important, as he is simply reporting what he sees and the focus is on somebody else.

## 7. Conclusion

In the abovementioned study, Edgar Allan Poe's characteristic literary technique has been examined. The focus was his use of first-person narration, since all but two of Poe's short stories was written with a first person narrator.

Certainly, Poe selected this viewpoint with a purpose. A close look at Poe's criticisms, like for instance his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* and his own essay "Philosophy of Composition", discloses that he was rather preoccupied with the numerous features of narration, such as focus, variety, plausibility, objectivity, unity of tone and effect, reader sympathy, exposure of personal and psychological mental conditions, and dramatic irony. These elements, included in Poe's own method, point to the fact that his works were created with much consideration and thought. He must have recognized the fundamental benefits and risks characteristically found in first-person narration because his tales divulge a constantly growing skill with method of narration.

As Poe's primary intention when writing a short story was to create an effect, he discovered that the single effect was far more important than that of the overall dramatic effect, as it defined the structure of the short story more forcefully. He then developed an impeccable technique to bind his tales together as a whole, and his tales demonstrate how his amazing grasp and technique usage helped him to voice the ideas and moods so special to his genius.

Since more than half of Poe's stories have their place in the group of protagonists as narrators, and one of the most prominent features of these stories are the highlighting of terror of the soul, it seems as if Poe favored the discourse of a protagonist because it allows for a distinctive kind of deeply personal exposure of main character and perhaps also because Poe himself felt an inherent connection with the rather obsessive and creative characters. As is the

case in “The Cask of Amontillado”, published near the end of Poe's authorship. It has a narrator who introduces his story credibly and keeps an appropriate relationship between self-analysis and the events. The intense effect of these tales lies primarily in their allowing the reader to share the emotional experiences with the narrator.

In the group of minor characters as narrators, the most prominent feature is the fact that they mainly consist of tales of ratiocination. In these cases, the narrator is an admiring and rather ordinary friend of the protagonist. The stories about Detective Dupin have recognized Poe as the creator of a new literary way. His accomplishments with these tales is beyond doubt. In tales like “The Purloined Letter”, the envisioned effect is to arouse intellectual aspiration for the reader while he observes the protagonist as he solves the puzzle. The group of minor character's only exception is “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Here, in this tale of terror, the change to a minor character as the narrator demonstrates Poe's continuous and prosperous efforts both in order to create variations in his narrative positions and in order to see from every viewpoint the effect on his characters as they are exposed to paranormal and bizarre occurrences.

This study supports the conclusion that Poe intentionally opted to tell his tales with a restricted first-person narrator as opposed to the more common choice of a third person narrator with an omniscient view. And even with the danger of his narrators being deemed unreliable, Poe still chose to use narrators of questionable mental states, because it was not about the credibility of the narrator, it was about the effect a story could generate, and if that meant following the life of a mentally unstable narrator, then so be it. It was the unity of effect, the objectivity, and the need for inner views of terrified or suffering characters that all make up the possible reasons why Poe have continued using this technique throughout his

authorship. Though the range in the technique is limited, his skill in managing his chosen way is extraordinary to any and all who studies it.

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## Appendix 1

Chronological list of Edgar Allan Poe's tales in which the protagonist is also the narrator.

1. "Loss of Breath" - 1832
2. "MS. Found in a Bottle" - 1833
3. "Berenice" - 1835
4. "Morella" - 1835
5. "Lionizing" - 1835
6. "Shadow - a Parable" - 1835
7. "Ligeia" - 1838
8. "How to Write a Blackwood Article" - 1838
9. "A Predicament" - 1838
10. "William Wilson" - 1839
11. "Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling" - 1840
12. "The Business Man" - 1840
13. "The Island of the Fay" - 1841
14. "Eleonora" - 1841
15. "The Landscape Garden" - 1842
16. "The Pit and the Pendulum" - 1842
17. "The Tell-Tale Heart" - 1843
18. "The Black Cat" - 1843
19. "The Elk" - 1844
20. "The Spectacles" - 1844
21. "The Premature Burial" - 1844
22. "Mesmeric Revelation" - 1844
23. "The Angel of the Odd" - 1844
24. "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." - 1844
25. "Some Words with a Mummy" - 1845
26. "The Imp of the Perverse" - 1845
27. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" - 1845
28. "The Sphinx" - 1846
29. "The Cask of Amontillado" - 1846
30. "The Domain of Arnheim" - 1847
31. "Mellonta Tauta" - 1849
32. "Landor's Cottage" - 1849

## Appendix 2

Chronological list of Edgar Allan Poe's tales in which the minor character is the narrator.

1. "The Assination" - 1834
2. "Mystification" - 1837
3. "The Man that Was Used Up" - 1839
4. "The Fall of the House of Usher" - 1839
5. "The Man of the Crowd" - 1840
6. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" - 1841
7. "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" - 1841
8. "Three Sundays in a Week" - 1841
9. "The Mystery of Marie Roget" - 1842
10. "The Cold-Bug" - 1843
11. "The Oblong Box" - 1844
12. "Thou Art the Man" - 1844
13. "The Purloined Letter" - 1845
14. "The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether" - 1845
15. "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" - 1849