

Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011

p. 232 - Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart":

In "The Tell-Tale Heart" Poe exploits the popular interest in sensational crime but at the same time avoids both the moral ambiguities surrounding the Knapp case and the grisly sensationalism surrounding the Robinson case. The rather amoral popular interest in terrible crime that had been catered to by crime pamphlets and by lyrically gory novels like Lippard's *The Ladye Annabel* (1842) is intentionally disregarded in this tale. True, Poe presents a story of murder, **dismemberment**, and burial under floor planks. But he avoids repulsive accounts of violence or blood, shifting his attention to the crazed mind of the obsessed narrator. By removing us from the realm of horrid gore to that of diseased psychology, he rises above the kind of tawdry sensationalism that had surrounded the Robinson case. At the same time, he purposely avoids the moral quagmire surrounding the figure of the likable criminal, as epitomized by Frank Knapp, who in jail was so cool and affable that even an intelligent observer like Hawthorne was inclined to admire him. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" Poe enters the consciousness of the cool murderer and watches this consciousness deconstruct due to terrors of its own creation. At the beginning of the tale, the murderer is boasting "with what caution—with what foresight" he

executes the murder of the old man and the disposal of the body under floor planks.²⁴ His coolness carries over into his blithe explanations to the police, but then we see it quickly collapse as he becomes a shrieking mass of quivering remorse. Many popular crime narratives had confused the issue by portraying murderers sympathetically, concentrating not only on visions that haunt them but also their social motivations for crime and the many circuitous events that lead up to or stem from their crime. In Poe's tale there is no such excess and no such sympathy: there is simply a sharply focused dramatization of a "sane insane" criminal whose narration becomes the agency of its own subversion. The narrative voice itself undermines any sympathy we might have with this criminal. In the very first sentence Poe places us in the world of popular criminals—the world of the "sane insane"—but moral issues are quickly banished by the startling address to the reader: "True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. . . . Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story." Poe avoids the moral problems surrounding the criminal simply by making the criminal's crazed narration itself a main object of our attention. We enjoy the sharp *effect* of the narration on our nerve endings and don't ask moral questions about a man whose sane madness is itself the point of the literary game. We are more engaged with this criminal on an emotional level but less enamored with him on a moral level than we are in much popular literature. We are given no motive or justification for his crime, other than the obviously insane one of his obsession with the old man's eye. We feel the intensity of this obsession, we are horrified by his crime, but we are not ever sympathetic with this psychopath. Poe has lifted us at once beyond sensationalism and beyond one of sensational literature's most problematic figures, the likable or justified criminal.

A similarly deconstructive use of popular sensational devices characterizes "The Fall of the House of Usher." In this tale Poe gives us three kinds of sensational texts: "The Haunted Palace" (Roderick Usher's song),

which embodies the musical, poetic treatment of sensational themes; Launcelot Canning's "The Mad Trist," the action-packed, structureless story which whips Usher to a mad frenzy as he hears it read aloud; and the main narrative, which serves as a highly regulated battleground on which the other texts compete. "The Haunted Palace," the song about a mythical palace whose happy inhabitants are driven out by "evil things" and replaced by "vast forms" that move to "a discordant melody," possesses the ideality and the poetic structure that Poe regarded as the highest possible mode of dealing with the sensational.²⁷ "The Mad Trist," in contrast, possesses the prolixity, the flatness, and the merely adventurous action that Poe disliked—and that he often associated with popular sensational fiction. The narrator reads the story to Usher even though he knows "there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had

interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend." But Usher's ideality collapses before the wildness of the story, which becomes fused in his mind with the raging storm and the horrid vision of his blood-covered sister rising from her coffin. In effect, poetic ideality is overthrown by gruesome, unartistic sensationalism. The clamorous noises described in "The Mad Trist" become fused with the sounds Usher hears, as the wildly sensational penetrates and destroys the realm of the poetically ideal. As a whole, the tale has built up to the forlorn musicality of "The Haunted Palace" and then has been deconstructed by the savage, directionless sensationalism embodied in "The Mad Trist." Figuratively, the fall of the house of Usher is a fearful projection of the fall of the house of Poe: that is, the fall of the artistic control and unity that Poe feared would accompany modern sensational writings, whose typical narrative patterns he knew to be as crooked as the zigzag fissure that splits apart Usher's mansion.

Whatever fears about his culture Poe may have been projecting, he created a memorable tale that has outlived lesser literature of his day precisely because it assumes thorough control over the sensational. The unexampled unity of the story is itself an assertion of faith—faith in ordered literary words as opposed to the chaotic words Poe saw all around him. The main narrative embodies what might be called the highest possible prose version of sensational themes. It is not a mere string of flat, adventurous events, as is "The Mad Trist" or the popular sensational writings of Poe's day. It has total unity; everything is interconnected. The house "is" Roderick Usher, who "is" his sister; none can exist without the other. Throughout the story, there is a complete interpenetration between the physical and the spiritual, between the psychological and the visionary. All the images mirror and amplify each other, from the dreary day to vacant, eyelike windows to the narrator's depressed spirits to Usher's pallid skin and growing agitation, to the storm and "The Mad Trist," through

the shattering conclusion. Because of this interlocking structure, wild sensationalism does not overwhelm the narrative, as it does in many popular texts. Instead, it becomes just one element that is subsumed under a general artistic plan. "The Mad Trist" serves nicely to speed the terrifying denouement. The type of fragmented sensational text Poe despised becomes the final brick in the artistic house he has built. We watch with admiration as the careful placement of this brick brings the whole house tumbling down.

If "The Fall of the House of Usher" studies the destructive effects of the wildly sensational, "Ligeia" dramatizes the nurturing effects of the arabesque. It is understandable that Poe twice called "Ligeia" his best story, because it contains all the imagery that in Poe's eyes removed sensational

p. 247-48 "The Purloined Letter"-

By the time he wrote "The Purloined Letter" (1844) he had moved so far away from the sensational that both crime and its detection operate on a purely intellectual level. Poe's statement that this was "perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination" reflects his high regard for crime fiction totally removed from the mire of repulsiveness.⁴⁰ His previous two detective stories had affirmed the power of the analytical mind but still had devoted much time to popular reportage of gory events. In "The Purloined Letter" the emphasis is reversed: not only are there no gory events, but the crime is the bloodless one of letter stealing and the identity of the criminal is known from the start. Indeed, crime is absent from this story, which directs our attention to the mental principles behind crime. Poe now brings together many elements from his previous tales to forge his ultimate imaginary victory over the irrational. The amoral criminal who becomes the means of his own destruction (an idea he studied differently in "William Wilson," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Imp of the Perverse") is represented here by the Minister D—, except that here the self-destruction is masterminded by the thoughtful detective who guesses D—'s mental operations. The abbreviated discussions of phrenological ideas in "Murders in the Rue Morgue" are replaced here by long, detailed monologues by Dupin on the science of the mind. Poe's rationalistic theory of poetry is echoed in Dupin's account of the faculty

of analysis, which is said to bring together the mathematical and the poetical. Sensationalism is reduced to a disturbance in the street caused by a gunshot, which diverts D—'s attention and makes possible Dupin's switching of the letters. The fact that the disturbance is created by a man in Dupin's hire shows the large degree to which sensationalism is under the control of the intellect. As in "The Fall of the House of Usher," the sensational is put in place to create an effect. There is, of course, a key difference: in "Usher" the reading of "The Mad Trist" leads to the wild climax; in "The Purloined Letter" the gunshot leads to the intellectual victory of the detective. But the difference is more apparent than real, for in both cases the sensational is skillfully put in place by the literary artist with the effect of deconstructing the evil or bizarre images of the narrative: the House of Usher collapses, and D— is outwitted. In the latter case, the victory of the analytical power is especially sweet, for Poe is imaginatively outwitting the heroic villain of popular crime narratives. In direct opposition to the popular stereotype of the sympathetic criminal, Poe establishes the detective as a force for both high intellect and high morality, one who can declare that he has "no sympathy—at least no pity" for D—, who is called "that *monstrum horrendum*, an unprincipled man of genius."⁴¹ Poe has given us the ultimate example of a popular stereotype—the amoral, cool, brilliant criminal—and has defeated him through the creation of a character who is even more cool, more brilliant than he—and who upholds morality. In creating the brainy detective, Poe gained victory over the popular Subversive imagination.

-Poetic devices in Poe's "The Raven":

-the originality of the metrical pattern—In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe says, "And here I may as well say a few words of the versification. **My first object (as usual) was originality.** The extent to which this has been neglected, in versification, is one of the most unaccountable things in the world. Admitting that there is little possibility of variety in mere rhythm, it is still clear that the possible varieties of meter and stanza are absolutely infinite—and yet, for centuries, no man, in verse, has ever done, or ever seemed to think of doing, an original thing. ... Of course, **I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or meter of "The Raven."** **The former is trochaic—the latter is octameter acatalectic, alternating with heptameter catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrameter catalectic.** Less pedantically—the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short: the **first line** of the stanza consists of **eight of these feet**—the

second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds)—the third of eight—the fourth of seven and a half—the fifth the same—the sixth, three and a half. Now, each of these lines, taken individually, has been employed before, and what originality “The Raven” has, is in their combination into stanza: nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted. The effect of this originality of combination is aided by other unusual and some altogether novel effects, arising from an extension of the application of the principles of rhyme and alliteration.

Line 1 - trochaic octometer [8 trochees]

Line 2 - trochaic heptameter [7 trochees]

Line 3 - trochaic octometer [8 trochees]

Line 4 - trochaic heptameter [7 trochees] .. [etc..] until-

5. The last line of each verse: trochaic trimeter [3 trochees]

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/ x / x / x / x / x / x / x / x

1. Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,

/ x / x / x / x / x / x /

2. Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—

/ x / x / x x / x / x / x / x

3. While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,

/ x / x / x / x / x / x / x /

4. As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

/ x / x / x /

5. Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

Alliteration: the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words--

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain [...]

Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;

Internal rhyme: a rhyme involving a word in the middle of a line and another at the end of the line or in the middle of the next--

But the silence was **unbroken**, and the stillness gave no **token**,
And the only word there **spoken**

Or:

Thrilled me—**filled** me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the **beating** of my heart, I stood **repeating**
“’Tis some visitor **entreating** entrance at my chamber door—
Some late visitor **entreating** entrance at my chamber door;—
This it is and nothing more.”

Or:

But the fact is I was **napping**, and so gently you came **rapping**,
And so faintly you came **tapping, tapping** at my chamber door,

Metaphor: a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn't literally true, but helps to explain ideas or make a comparison. Here's the only metaphor in "The Raven":

Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

A simple metaphor: "You are the sunshine of my life."

Simile - uses "like" or "as"—"You are **like** the sunshine."