A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH: THE CONTINUITY OF IDENTITY
IN THE FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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Some of the most interesting facets of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction are his imaginative speculations concerning the metaphysical experiences of the soul, the individual psychic "identity." His interest focuses primarily on three related aspects of the soul's experience: (1) metempsychosis (or reincarnation and transmigration); (2) suspension between "death" and the after-life or states of unconsciousness and consciousness, sleep and waking; and (3) the terrors, real or imagined, of premature burial. Poe does not attempt to supply the answers to questions on immortality and the soul. Through his fiction, Poe suggests only possibilities. Each of his tales is unique in its approach, but all together provide an insight into Poe's views on the continuity and experience of psychic identity.

For some critics any attempt to discover a meaningful pattern in Poe's world of mystery, horror, and perverseness seems a wasted effort. Too often critics emphasize the plots of the stories while giving little attention to Poe's concern with the driving force within man which struggles for survival against seemingly overwhelming odds.
Chapter II examines metempsychosis, which consists of the transmigration of souls (the present passing from one body to another) and reincarnation (the later return in a new body or form). "Metsengerstein," "Morella," and "The Oval Portrait" illustrate Poe's interest in transmigration. In several other of his tales, Poe examines the psychological implications of the transitional experience—seemingly outside of time and space—of passing from unconsciousness to consciousness, from sleep to waking, and from "death" to the after-life. Poe's use of this transitional state of suspension is the subject of Chapter III. "The Coloquy of Monos and Una," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" offer examples of such experiences of suspension. Chapter IV examines the terrors of burial alive, the speculative subject of several of Poe's tales. "Berenice," "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Premature Burial" contain examples of Poe's speculations on living burial.

A close examination of Poe's tales shows clearly that he is not only a writer of horror stories but also a thinker of some depth, one of whose primary interests lies in the possibilities of the continuity of man's individuality or "psychic identity." Though usually read for pleasure—suspense and horror—the tales contain a solid substructure of philosophical speculations on the nature of the soul. Poe makes no attempt to dictate to his readers; in each tale he
leaves them with a choice of interpretation and the option of reading it on any one of several levels. Nor is Poe afraid to introduce into his tales questions on the usually avoided subject of immortality. Though Poe seems not to have been interested in Christian doctrines of immortality *per se*, his speculations on the nature of the soul, the death experience, the after-life, and the continuity of psychic identity have added depth, dimension, and complexity to his supposedly slight and "entertaining" horror tales. Read on this level, he is indeed, as many scholars have claimed, one of the earliest and best American writers of psychological fiction.
A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH: THE CONTINUITY OF IDENTITY
IN THE FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
August, 1972
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most interesting facets of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction are his speculations concerning the metaphysical experiences of the soul, the individual psychic "identity."

In "Morella" Poe's narrator perhaps best expresses Poe's interest:

That identity which is termed personal, Mr. Locke, I think, truly defines to consist in the saneness of a rational being. And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call ourselves—thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the principium individuationis—the notion of that identity which at death is or is not lost for ever—was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest . . . (4, p. 668).

In other tales Poe explores imaginatively various possibilities concerning the nature of the soul, of the experience of dying, and of the after-life. His interest focuses primarily on three related aspects of the soul's experience: (1) metempsychosis or reincarnation and transmigration; (2) suspension between "death" and the after-life or states of unconsciousness and consciousness, sleep and waking; and (3) the terrors, real or imagined, of premature burial. Poe does not attempt to supply the answers to questions on immortality and the soul. Through his fiction, Poe suggests
only possibilities. Each of his tales is unique in its approach, but all together provide an insight into Poe's views on the continuity and experience of psychic identity. Though Poe seems not to have been interested in Christian doctrines of immortality per se, his speculations add depth and dimension to his supposedly slight and "entertaining" horror tales. Read on this level, they seem indeed to be some of the earliest and best American examples of psychological fiction.

For some critics any attempt to discover a meaningful pattern in Poe's world of mystery, horror, and perverseness seems a wasted effort. William Mentzel Forrest views Poe's writings as "widely scattered thoughts upon many subjects"—not as "a systematized and scientific treatise" (2, p. 55). For others, an insight into Poe's writings is essential "to unite the scattered bits into any comprehensible whole" (3, p. 15). Even when one acknowledges the presence of a pattern of thought in Poe's works, he often qualifies his opinion by admitting that Poe does not follow "the laws of ordinary human character but rather those of some fantastic world as strange yet as self-consistent as the world in which the creatures of his imagination lead their nightmare lives" (3, pp. 15-16). Before one can arrive at an understanding of the intricate pattern Poe weaves in his fictional speculations concerning the soul's experience, it is necessary to examine Poe's concept of the universe.
In the prose poem "Eureka," Poe defines the term universe as "the utmost conceivable expanse of space, with all things, spiritual and material, that can be imagined to exist within the compass of that expanse" (6, p. 186). In his explication of "Eureka," Richard Wilbur summarizes Poe's view of the universe: Poe places God in space as a spirit who willed Himself into existence and who exists "at the center of space in a state of perfect totality and unity." Out of necessity, God became diversified by hurling Himself into space to form concentric spheres of being (9, p. 11). God now exists in the universe in a diffused state, and "the regathering of his diffused Matter and Spirit will be but the re-constitution of the purely Spiritual and Individual God" (6, p. 313). Poe's concept of the individual's "psychic identity," therefore, may be seen to be closely related to his view of the unity and continuity of God.

Using Poe's "Eureka" as the basis for his theory, Vincent Buranelli suggests that "Poe's system is a kind of pantheism, the identification of God with the world" (1, p. 52). For Edward Wagenknecht, however, Poe's view of God was conventional, even orthodox. Wagenknecht believes that Poe saw 'the glory of God' revealed by the 'grand and beautiful' in nature, but he was in no danger of pantheism, for he also saw the imperfection in nature as reasonably explained by the hypothesis of the Fall (8, p. 210).

Evidence that Poe was not a pantheist may be found in a letter that Poe wrote to Charles Fenno Hoffman. The
letter, in which Poe accuses Hoffman of misrepresenting his work, chides Hoffman for referring to him as a "pantheist" and is a reply to an article published by Hoffman on "Eureka":

Were these 'misrepresentations' (is that the name for them?) made for any less serious a purpose than that of branding my book as 'implious,' and myself as a 'pantheist,' a 'polytheist,' a Pagan, or a God knows what (and indeed I care very little so it be not a 'Student of Theology'), I would have permitted their dishonesty to pass unnoticed, through pure contempt for the boyishness—for the turn-down-shirt collarness of their tone:—but, I have been compelled to explore a 'critic,' who, courageously preserving his own anonymity, takes advantage of my absence from the city to misrepresent, and thus vilify me, by name (5, p. 303).

Charles Thomas Samuels implies that in Poe's fiction the soul's quest is for perfection which can be realized only through death (7, p. 214). Although death comes to the body, the soul continues to live. Poe strongly affirms the immortality of the soul and expresses this belief in the motto he chose for the tale "Ligeia." The Motto, taken from Joseph Glanvill, reads:

And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will (4, p. 654).

Once acquainted with Poe's thought and concept of the universe, the reader can better examine the various possibilities of the soul's experience as exemplified in Poe's tales. Chapter II will examine metempsychosis, which consists of the transmigration of souls (the present passing
from one body to another) and reincarnation (the later return in a new body or form). "Metzengerstein," "Morella," and "The Oval Portrait" illustrate Poe's interest in transmigration. In "Metzengerstein" the soul of the Old Count simply reappears in the form of a horse. Since the Young Baron Metzengerstein is supposedly responsible for the old man's death, the spirit of the Count Berlifitzing seeks revenge upon the young Metzengerstein. His revenge is complete when the horse plunges with the Young Baron into the flames of the burning Palace Metzengerstein. It is of interest to note that in Poe's earliest tales of transmigration, he does not concern himself with either the means or the manner of the transformation. The use of transmigration is more complicated in "Morella." This tale relates the death of a beautiful, intelligent young woman and her supposed reappearance in the body of her child. "The Oval Portrait" is similar to "Metzengerstein" in its simplicity. The artist, in painting the picture of his lovely wife, transfers both her beauty and her vitality to the canvas in such a way that it becomes life-like, capturing the essence of her personality and, in effect, housing the living spirit of the young woman.

"Ligeia," "The Black Cat," and "Eleonora" explore various possibilities of reincarnation. In "Ligeia" Poe's treatment of reincarnation seems complicated. Ligeia "dies," then returns, supposedly by displacing the soul of Rowena, her husband's second wife. The physical transformation of
Rowena's body does not occur, however, until Ligeia's return is fully accomplished. In the eyes of the narrator, the physical change seems complete, for he sees once again before him the living Ligeia. "The Black Cat" is more simple than "Ligeia." The narrator believes he recognizes the characteristics of his dead cat Pluto in the body of another cat. The redeeming qualities of love and the reincarnation of the beloved make up the theme of "Eleonora." After his loss of Eleonora, the grieving narrator marries Ermengarde, in whom perhaps he sees embodied the same qualities that he adored in his first love—Eleonora.

"A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" joins the themes of transmigration and suspension between states of unconsciousness and consciousness or "death" and the after-life. The narrator Bedloe can recall a time forty-seven years before when he, as army officer Oldeb, was killed by a poisoned arrow. Immediately following his death, he experienced a sudden "electrical" shock throughout his body, and his soul left the body and returned to a particular spot on a mountain path. Here he experienced a second "electrical" shock and felt his physical body being restored. However, instead of having the body of Oldeb, he now has the body of Bedloe, the narrator. As in almost every Poe story, in "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" he leaves the reader with an option—to accept the transmigration of Oldeb's spirit into the body of Bedloe or to believe that the narrator's experience was imaginary.
In several other of his tales, Poe examines the psychological implications of the transitional experience—seemingly outside of time and space—of passing from unconsciousness to consciousness, from sleep to waking, and from "death" to the after-life. Poe's use of this transitional state of suspension is the subject of Chapter III. "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" offer examples of such experiences of suspension. The principal characters in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" have died and are waiting to be "born again." They recall and discuss the experience of dying and the passage into the life-after-death. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" the condemned man describes his experience of suspension upon awakening in the dungeon. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" presents an attempt to retard the processes of "death" through mesmerism.

Chapter IV examines the terrors of the soul in burial alive, the speculative subject of several of Poe's tales. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick, thinking that his sister is dead, buries her in a vault. Sometime later, Madeline awakens from a cataleptic trance, and Roderick believes he hears her struggles within the tomb. Because of a personal injury to his pride, Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" buries his friend alive in the depths of a catacomb and wine cellar. By his silence, the brave Fortunato deprives Montresor of the sadistic pleasure of
hearing his outcries, causing the reader more easily to sympathize and identify with him. Through his imagination, the reader, like Fortunato, can experience the feeling of suffocation, which accompanies burial alive, as his murderer slowly constructs the wall.

Many readers enjoy Poe's tales solely for their horrifying effect. However, a close examination of the tales reveals that many of them contain other important elements than horror. One of Poe's principal concerns in the tales is the continued efforts of the soul to exist in spite of the almost overwhelming odds. Of major importance in his treatment of the soul are Poe's tales dealing with metempsychosis. These tales reflect Poe's growing interest in the soul's ability to move presently to another body or return later in a new body or form.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


Poe's speculations on metempsychosis are not new. The belief in metempsychosis appears in several cultures: primitive, eastern, and western. Although there appears to be no evidence that Poe was familiar with these cultures, a brief examination of their philosophies will help the reader to gain a better understanding of Poe's beliefs. In all three cultures little distinction is made between the terms metempsychosis, reincarnation, and transmigration of souls. In primitive cultures a vital part of the idea of the mobile soul is the belief in a plurality of souls. One of the souls of an individual is small and capable of moving in and out of the body through the mouth or the nostrils. The Poso Alfurs of Celebes believe that man has three souls: the inosa or "vital principle," the angga or "intellectual," and the tanoana or "divine element." The third soul is able to leave the body and "is of the same nature in many plants and animals" (7, p. 265). Consequently, most primitives believe that the soul may pass into an insect, such as a wasp, hornet, cicada, or dung beetle, or into a large animal, such as a bearcat, and, in a few cultures, even into a tree or flower (7, pp. 265-266). Some African tribes believe that the soul
of a king may pass into the body of a lion (2, p. 15).
It is also possible for the soul to pass into the body of another person. Such a belief in the transference of the soul parallels Poe's speculations on transmigration.

The belief in metempsychosis is also found in the cultures of the East—particularly in the philosophy of India. Everything finite with which man comes in contact belongs to the world of change. The principal Indian religion—Hinduism—defines the "Self" or soul (atman) as that which "is forever changeless, beyond time, beyond space and the veiling not of causality, beyond measure, beyond the dominion of the eye" (17, p. 3). Although the doctrine of the ancient Aryans contains no mention of reincarnation or transmigration of souls, their beliefs served as the basis for later Indian philosophy. The Aryans believed that at death the souls of men who had led righteous lives went to reside in the World of the Fathers, which was presided over by the god of death, Yama. The souls of the unrighteous went into a dark pit from which they never returned (7, p. 266). These ancient people thought that "beings who once had been, could never cease to be. They must exist somewhere, perhaps in the realm of the setting sun where Yama rules" (13, p. 114).

The theory of metempsychosis does not appear in Indian philosophy until the age of the Upanishads around 600 B.C. An interesting correlation exists between several of Poe's ideas and the Indian beliefs. The view expressed in the
Upanishads is that at the death of the physical body, the soul may either reach life eternal by going to live with Brahman, the Absolute, "the first principle of things," or continue its struggle to become worthy of immortality by further labor on earth (13, p. 250). The servitude of the soul on earth is called samsara. No matter how close the soul comes to the Absolute, unity with Brahman can never be reached as long as it remains imprisoned in the body. The period of servitude required on earth is not definable by mortals. Death is defined as "nothing but birth cradled in flames" (13, p. 443). Life is symbolized by a rotating wheel which presents man with new opportunities to improve his fate. It is his duty to take advantage of them (13, p. 443). In striving for the goal of spiritual perfection, the Hindu passes through many lives. Each life is either a step backward or forward, and the outcome of each life is determined by one's "thought, will, and action" (14, p. 634).

The doctrine of Jainism, another Indian religion, expresses the belief that karma—the effect of one's deeds, good or bad—is "a subtle substance which adheres to the soul, hiding its natural brilliance and involving it in a corporal state" (7, p. 267). All activity produces karma, but evil deeds that do harm to other living beings produce
the greatest amount of the substance. Jaina cosmology
defines the universe as

a living organism, made animate throughout by
life-monads /microcosmic spiritual entities/
which circulate through its limbs and spheres;
and this organism will never die. We ourselves,
furthermore—i.e., the life-monads contained
within and constituting the very substance of
the imperishable great body—are imperishable
too. We ascend and descend through various states
of being, now human, now divine, now animal; the
bodies seem to die to be born, but the chain is
continuous, the transformations endless, and all
we do is pass from one state to the next (17,
pp. 227-228).

The constant accumulation of karma keeps the soul
from being liberated and forces it to undergo an endless
process of transmigration. With the death of the body,
the soul is reborn with a new body. Jainism's belief
in rebirth is very similar to Poe's concept of the
continuity of psychic identity through reincarnation.
According to the Indian doctrine, the nature of the new
body is determined by the type of karma that has accumulated
over the soul. The goal of the Jaina monk is to rid the
soul of the old deposit of karma and prevent new karma
from forming (7, p. 267). If the monk eats meat or
accidentally kills an insect, the crystal of his life-
monad becomes stained with karma, since he has taken part
in the destruction of a living being (17, pp. 254-255).

In order to prevent the buildup of karma and to destroy
that which is already deposited on the soul,
every door through which new karmic substance might enter into it must be tightly closed and kept that way. . . . To close the gates means to abstain from action, action of every sort. The beclouding matter already present within will then slowly dwindle, transforming itself automatically into the natural events of the biological life-process. The present karmic seeds will grow and yield their inevitable fruits in the form of sufferings and physical experiences, and so the discoloration will gradually disappear. Then at last, if no fresh particles are permitted to enter, the translucent purity of the life-monad will be automatically attained (17, p. 256).

Freed from its burden of *karma*, the soul can be liberated and "rise to the top of the universe where it will dwell eternally in blissful omniscience and inactivity" (7, p. 267).

The Orphic writings of Greek Mythology include the theme of reincarnation in the theory of the origin of man. After Zeus slew the Titans with thunderbolts for murdering and eating his son Zagreus, man sprang from the soot of their burning bodies. Thus, man is composed of two parts—a small divine element from Zeus and a large wicked element from the Titans. It is man’s duty to eliminate the wicked element in order to rise to divine status. According to some ancient doctrines, man’s soul survives the death of the body, is rewarded or punished in another world, and is later reincarnated in a human or animal body. The soul therefore continues the cycle of death, punishment or reward, and rebirth. Ultimately, the soul has hopes of being released from its cycle (7, p. 265). In "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" Poe’s characters have died and are waiting to be "reborn."
Drawing upon the Orphic tradition, several philosophers formulated their ideas of the soul. Pythagoras believed it was possible for the soul to pass from one body to another, whether it was human or non-human. For example, he once said to a friend who was beating a puppy: "Do not hit him. It is the soul of a friend of mine. I recognized it when I heard it cry out (11, pp. 802-803). According to Pythagoras, if a man led a pure life, his soul might permanently be released from the flesh. However, the body served as a prison for the soul, and only the souls of a few could ever be released from the flesh (11, p. 803).

Like Pythagoras, Plato believed that the body was continually hindering the soul because of its infirmities. He thought that it is possible that "the soul has a succession of many lives and that, when it is born into this world, it has come back from another" (10, p. 54). This previous existence causes man to "recollect" experiences from a past existence and apply them to the present. Thus, man has ideas in morals, mathematics, and science which have not been learned in the present but in a previous existence. In "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" Poe's treatment of the recollection of an experience from the past seems to parallel the thinking of Pythagoras and Plato.

A disciple of Plato, Philo believed that man has a twofold nature. One side of him is godlike; the other is evil. Like the philosophers before him, Philo believed that
the body is the prison of the soul and that man's soul seeks to reach again to God. Only those few souls who have lived a worthy life may reach to God. The others must pass into another body after the death of the body they now inhabit (9, p. 740).

Poe's initial use of the transmigration of souls is illustrated in the tale "Metzengerstein" (1832). In this tale, the soul of the Old Count Berlifitzing simply reappears in the form of a horse. For many years a feud has existed between the Berlifitzing and Metzengerstein families, and the young Metzengerstein is supposedly now responsible for the fire which destroys the Berlifitzing stables. On the night of the fire, while standing in the home of his ancestors, the Young Baron Metzengerstein stares at an ancient tapestry depicting a horse in the foreground with its Berlifitzing rider being slain by a Metzengerstein farther back in the picture. As the Baron momentarily looks away from the tapestry, the horse, seemingly the focal point of the picture, changes its position. When the young man's eyes return to the picture,

the neck of the animal, before arched, as if in compassion, over the prostrate body of its lord, was now extended, at full length, in the direction of the Baron. The eyes, before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red; and the distended lips of the apparently enraged horse left in full view his sepulchral and disgusting teeth (9, p. 674).

Terrified, Metzengerstein thinks he sees his shadow

"assuming the exact position, and precisely filling up the
contour, of the relentless and triumphant murderer of the Saracen Berlifitzing" (8, p. 674).

Very soon after this, a horse which seems the counterpart of the horse in the tapestry appears at the gate of the Metzengerstein palace. Branded on his forehead are the initials W. V. B., which could stand for Wilhelm Von Berlifitzing, but all at the Berlifitzing castle deny any knowledge of the animal. By taming the spirited horse, the Young Baron hopes to make the beautiful animal his personal mount. Immediately after the arrival of the animal at the Metzengerstein palace, a servant reports that a portion of the tapestry has disappeared. The reader presumes the missing section to be the picture of the horse. When the servant leaves, one of the vassals informs the Young Baron of the Count's death in the fire. A prophecy which relates to the feud is recalled:

'A lofty name shall have a fearful fall when, as the rider over his horse, the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing' (8, p. 672).

The prophecy seemingly begins to come true with the appearance of the steed. No one but the young Metzengerstein dares to venture near the beast, and the stamping of the horse's hoofs and the "searching expression of his earnest and human-looking eye" are sufficient to make the Young Baron turn pale (8, p. 677). The behavior of the horse and its "human-looking eye" suggest the presence of the spirit of the Old Count in the animal. It is interesting to note
also that the Count has a "passionate . . . love for horses and for hunting" (8, p. 673). It therefore seems appropriate that the old man's spirit may have reappeared in the form of the horse. One evening while the Young Baron is out riding, a roaring fire sweeps through the palace, and the foundations begin to crack. The ancient prophecy is apparently fulfilled as the horse leaps with the disheveled rider into the flames. Immediately, the fire dies away, a white flame resembling a shroud envelops the palace, and above the ruins looms a white cloud of smoke in the shape of a horse. As with all of Poe's tales, the reader may believe either that the spirit of the Old Count is embodied in the horse and obtains its revenge on the Metzengerstein family by leaping into the flames with the Young Baron or that the young man only thinks he sees the spirit of the Old Count in the animal.

The tale "Morella" (1835) is also illustrative of Poe's interest in the continuity of psychic identity through transmigration. In this tale, Poe defines "identity" as "a consciousness which always accompanies thinking" and which "makes us all to be that which we call ourselves--thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think . . . " (8, p. 668). T. O. Mabbott suggests that transmigration has occurred by his description of Morella as "a single soul in the body first of a mother and then of her daughter" (6, p. 27).
As Morella dies, she leaves her husband with a promise:

'I repeat that I am dying. But within me is a pledge of that affection--ah, how little!--which thou didst feel for me, Morella. And when my spirit departs shall the child live--thy child and mine, Morella's. But thy days shall be days of sorrow--that sorrow which is the most lasting of impressions, as the cypress is the most enduring of trees. For the hours of thy happiness are over; and joy is not gathered twice in a life, as the roses of Paestum twice in a year. Thou shalt no longer, then, play the Teian with time, but being ignorant of the myrtle and the vine, thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on the earth, as do the Moslem at Mecca' (8, p. 669).

The child, who is born at the moment of her mother's death, becomes "the perfect resemblance of her who had departed . . ." and possesses "the adult powers and faculties of the woman . . ." (8, p. 669). In his daughter's resemblance to Morella, the narrator finds "food for consuming thought and horror--for the worm that would not die" (8, p. 670). The correlations between the physical appearance and the mental capabilities of mother and daughter at first only hint of a possible transmigration of Morella's spirit into her child's body, but the words "I am here" which the dying child whispers at her baptism openly suggest that the mother's spirit is present in the body of her daughter.

Critics speculate on the cause of the child's death. Edward Wagenknecht implies, without saying how or why, that because Morella circumvents death by reappearing in the body of the second Morella, she sets her will "against the will of God." This defiance of God's will "is why Morella falls dead when her name is spoken at the font" (16, p. 217).
Charles L. Sanford points out that "the loved ones of . . . Poe's stories are commonly destroyed by too much knowledge, victims of psychic probing and analysis" (15, p. 63). Sanford believes that the father in "Korella" destroys his child as a result of his "incestuous knowledge" of the mother's spirit which appears in the child (15, p. 64). This critic implies that the narrator's living in seclusion with his daughter and closely observing the changes in her personality has led him to the destruction of his child's "identity." His wife has succeeded in taking possession of his thoughts, and her promise that "her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore" is completely fulfilled; therefore, the child dies (8, p. 669).

A story illustrative of Poe's interest in a unique form of transmigration is "The Oval Portrait" (1842). In this tale, the narrator, ill and feverish, is startled when he sees the painting of a beautiful young woman. Perplexed that the work should so capture his interest, he seeks to find the reason and discovers that "it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance" but the "absolute life-likeness of expression" that startled, "confounded, subdued, and appalled" him (8, p. 291). Turning to an ancient volume, the narrator learns the history of the painting. The artist had been "married" only to his work and, as a result, had neglected his beautiful wife. Even though she was jealous
of her husband's dedication to his art, the young woman agreed to pose for him. Day after day the artist painted, gradually draining the vitality from his wife's body and transferring it to the canvas. Just as the artist was about to place the last brush strokes on the portrait, the soul of the young woman briefly struggled before being transferred to the canvas: "the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp" (8, p. 292).

However, the painter was too busy with his work to notice the final glimmer of life in his wife. As he applied the last dab of paint, he proudly proclaimed, "'This is indeed life itself'" (8, p. 292).

In this tale Poe considers the possibility of the translation of a human soul into an art form—the portrait. The psychic identity of the young woman is thus preserved, but the structure which houses the soul has changed. Poe, of course, offers his readers a choice. It is possible that the history of the painting found in the ancient volume is only a fiction and that the feverish narrator simply imagines the life-like expression in the painting. It is also possible that the artist attains the highest degree of perfection in his work—the creation of a living work of art by the transference of the spirit of a living subject to the canvas.

The complicated tale "Ligeia" (1838) is further illustrative of Poe's interest in reincarnation. Ligeia
Ligeia represents the narrator's ideal woman. Roy P. Basler suggests that, to her husband, Ligeia is "a sort of personal Venus Aphrodite . . ." (1, p. 365). Although the narrator never knew the paternal name of his wife, he can vividly recall her physical appearance: "There is one dear topic, however, on which my memory fails me not. It is the person of Ligeia" (8, p. 654). He describes her "lofty and pale forehead," her "skin rivalling the purest ivory," her glossy "raven-black" hair which fell in "luxuriant and naturally-curving tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, 'hyacinthine,'" her delicate nose, sweet mouth, large eyes, and great learning (8, p. 655). The narrator's vivid memory of his wife Ligeia will help him "recognize" the same physical characteristics in the changed body of Rowena as Ligeia's soul completes its transmigration.

After Ligeia's death, the narrator marries Rowena but has no love for her. Instead, he is obsessed with thoughts of Ligeia, "the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed" (8, p. 661). He revels "in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty—her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love" (8, p. 661). James W. Gargano thinks that the narrator is "a man . . . who, having once inhabited the realm of the Ideal, seeks even unto madness to recreate his lost ecstasy" (4, p. 338). There is a good possibility that Gargano is correct, for the narrator states that:
In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug), I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathways she had abandoned—ah, could it be for ever?—upon the earth (8, pp. 661-662).

During the second month of their marriage, Rowena is attacked by a sudden illness which increases "the nervous irritation of her temperament, and her excitability by trivial causes of fear" (8, p. 662). As the narrator sits by his wife's bed, she appears to be fainting. Immediately, he rushes to her side with a glass of wine, which momentarily revives the lady. However, on the third night she apparently dies, and her servants prepare her body for the tomb.

As with all of Poe's stories, the reader has a choice. It is possible that Rowena dies from natural causes, and the narrator, heavily drugged, only dreams that she struggles to come alive. Obsessed with the memory of Ligeia, he believes he sees the body rise and come toward him. As the figure unloosens "the ghastly cerements" which hold its hair in place, the husband is confronted with "huge masses of long and dishevelled hair" which "was blacker than the raven wings of midnight" and with eyes which were "the full, and the black, and the wild eyes" of the Lady Ligeia (8, pp. 665-666). Another alternative for the reader is that the spirits of Ligeia and Rowena struggle for the possession of Rowena's body in order for Ligeia to return. Ligeia's
spirit succeeds momentarily. Following the motto Poe chose for the tale, the spirit of Ligeia has not yielded to death "utterly" but has now returned to dwell in the body of Rowena. The narrator is certain he sees the enshrouded body rise from the bed and advance "boldly and palpably into the middle of the apartment" (8, p. 665). Of the two choices offered the reader, Poe seems to prefer the latter interpretation when he later suggests that perhaps

'...there should have been a relapse--a final one--and Ligeia (who had only succeeded in so much as to convey an idea of the truth to the narrator) should be at length entombed as Rowena--the bodily alterations having gradually faded away' (12, p. 271).

"The Black Cat" (1843) is similar to "Metzengerstein" in its simplicity, and the motive behind Pluto's return, like the Old Count's, appears to be revenge. Because the narrator thinks he sees the later return of Pluto's spirit in the body of another cat, this tale illustrates Poe's early speculations on reincarnation. Although the narrator was once very fond of animals, because of drink he mistreats his cat Pluto, gouges out its eye, and later, when the appearance of the cat seems unbearably offensive, hangs the animal. Sometime later, the narrator encounters another cat which bears a striking resemblance to Pluto, for it is black and is missing one eye. The only difference between the two cats is the image of the gallows which the narrator sees on the cat's breast. Because the narrator grows to hate the second cat, he tries to kill it with an axe but
kills his wife instead. Through an apparent desire to exert his self-importance and perhaps a subconscious longing to be punished, Poe's narrator leads the police to the cellar supposedly to examine the masonry. He has led them to the exact spot where his wife is buried. Pounding on the wall with his cane, the narrator is startled by

a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation (8, p. 230).

The cat, buried alive behind the wall, perhaps has its revenge by being the means by which the police discover the body of the narrator's wife and lead him to the gallows.

In the tale "Eleonora" (1842) Poe speculates on the possible reincarnation of a beloved woman in the form of another woman whom the narrator marries. During the first fifteen years that the narrator and his cousin Eleonora spend in the Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass, the couple live in innocence. As they mature and fall in love, they become aware of the ruby-red asphodels of passion which replace the white daisies of innocence. Before Eleonora's death the narrator promises never to marry "any daughter of Earth" and invokes a curse of the Mighty Ruler of the Universe and of Eleonora if he ever breaks his vow (8, p. 651). In return, she promises to watch over him
in that spirit when departed, and, if so it were permitted her return to him visibly in the watches of the night; but, if this thing were, indeed, beyond the power of the souls in Paradise, that she would, at least, give him frequent indications of her presence; sighing upon him in the evening winds, or filling the air which he breathed with perfume from the censers of the angels (8, p. 652).

With the death of Eleonora, the joys of love are gone. Changes again take place in the Valley, as the flowers of passion wither. While the narrator sleeps, he thinks he hears "soft sighs" and "indistinct murmurs" which fill the night air, and once he is awakened by what he believes is "the pressing of spiritual lips" upon his (8, p. 652). To him, such supernatural happenings indicate the presence of Eleonora. Longing for his cousin but seeking to escape painful memories, the narrator moves to the city, where he meets and later marries Ermengarde. Poe implies that when the narrator falls in love with Ermengarde, he is, in reality, loving the spirit of Eleonora, which has returned in the human form of Ermengarde. He perhaps sees in Ermengarde the same qualities which he loved in Eleonora. Through the reincarnation of Eleonora’s spirit in the body of Ermengarde, Eleonora can keep her promise to watch over him. Because she realizes it is man’s nature to give and receive love, she saves her lover from a lonely existence in the Valley by absolving him of his promise. He will not be aware of the reincarnation of Eleonora’s spirit, however, until his physical body dies.
'Sleep in peace: for the Spirit of Love reigneth and ruleth, and, in taking to thy passionate heart her who is Ermengarde, thou art absolved, for reasons which shall be made known to thee in Heaven, of thy vows unto Eleonora' (8, p. 653).

Finally, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" joins transmigration with the state of suspension because elements of both themes are present in the tale. Although, as he speaks, the character Augustus Bedloe seems to be a young man, his physical body has the appearance of an old man. He is very thin, pale, and stooped with uneven teeth and eyes which

in moments of excitement . . . grew bright to a degree almost inconceivable; seeming to emit luminous rays, not of a reflected but of an intrinsic lustre, as does a candle or the sun; yet their ordinary condition was so totally vapid, filmy, and dull, as to convey the idea of the eyes of a long-interred corpse (8, p. 679).

Poe's description of Bedloe's physical appearance suggests the transmigration of the spirit from a young man into the body of an old man.

In this tale Poe's character describes the sensations the physical body experiences at death. When Bedloe, as army officer Oldeb, is struck by the poisoned arrow, he reels, falls, is seized by "an instantaneous and dreadful sickness," struggles, gasps, and dies. The feeling which immediately follows the death of the physical body is that of "darkness and nonentity" (8, p. 684). Next, a sudden "electrical" shock spreads throughout the body, and the narrator feels himself rising from the ground with "no bodily,
no visible, audible, or palpable presence" (8, p. 685). The spirit of the officer senses—but does not see—its own corpse lying on the ground; yet, the soul takes no interest in the disfigured body. The soul returns to a particular spot on the mountain path that leads to the city and here experiences a second "electrical" shock. As a result, the narrator feels his physical body being restored. However, instead of having the body of Oldeb, he now has the body of Bedloe.

Critics differ in their interpretations of Bedloe's return after the trip into the mountains. Harry Levin believes that the experience is a "transmigration . . . backward and eastward to a traumatic remembrance of black-barbed arrows from 'dusky-visaged races' " (5, p. 108). N. Bryllion Fagin, on the other hand, views the ability of the main character, who is "presumably still a young man," to relate a dream in which he "had actually personally experienced the events perceived" as "the recapitulation of a previous existence" (3, p. 170). Levin's statement that the tale is a step backward seems misleading. While it is true that Bedloe is relating his story for the narrator and Dr. Templeton, the entire tale appears to be a step forward in time. The fact that Bedloe can accurately retell the details of his "first death" forty-seven years before seems to indicate that he is "recalling" the experience from a previous existence as Oldeb.

Poe adds verisimilitude to the tale through the narrator's belief that the misspelling of Bedloe is not a typographical
error. Also, Bedloe's physical body dies the second time in a manner similar to the "first death." He is killed by applying poisonous leeches to the same part of his body where the arrow struck—his temple. As in almost every Poe story, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" leaves the reader with an option—to accept the transmigration of Oldeb's spirit into Bedloe's body, to believe that the narrator's experience was an opium-induced dream, or to speculate on the possibility that Bedloe's tale was the result of an hypnotic suggestion. Bedloe was an excellent subject for mesmerism, for "sleep was brought about almost instantaneously by the mere volition of the operator, even when the invalid was unaware of his presence" (8, p. 680). Dr. Templeton admits "that at the very period in which Bedloe fancied these things amid the hills, he, Templeton was engaged in detailing them upon paper here at home" (8, p. 686). Thus, Bedloe could have received the suggestion for his tale from the doctor, with whom he had "a very distinct and strongly marked rapport, or magnetic relation" (8, p. 680).

Each of these tales—"Metzengerstein," "Morella," "The Oval Portrait," "Ligeia," "The Black Cat," "Eleonora," and "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains"—illustrates a different aspect of Poe's interest in metempsychosis. In the tales of transmigration Poe advances several possibilities—the reappearance of the spirit of the Old Count in the horse, the presence of the mother's spirit in the body of her
daughter, the unique form of transmigration in which the
spirit of a beautiful woman is transferred to a piece of
canvas, and the transmigration of a young man's spirit into
an old man's body. The form of the earliest tale of
transmigration—"Metzengerstein" (1832)—is simple while
that of "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844) is very
complex. On the other hand, Poe's tales of reincarnation
begin with the complicated tale "Ligeia" (1838) and progress
to the simple tale "The Black Cat" (1843). In two of the
tales of reincarnation—"Eleonora" and "Ligeia"—the theme
is the reincarnation of a beautiful woman in the body of
another. A third tale—"The Black Cat"—contains the
reincarnation of one animal's spirit in the body of a second
cat. Overlapping Poe's tales of metempsychosis are his
tales of suspension. Since "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains"
contains elements of both transmigration and the state of
suspension, it provides Poe with another opportunity to
look imaginatively into the mysteries of the human soul.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER III

STATE OF SUSPENSION

Through several of his tales, Poe speculates about death as a transitional state of suspension and entry into a realm of supernatural awareness, discovery, and knowledge. In "The Premature Burial" (1844) the term "suspended animation" can be used to describe the thin division which Poe believes separates life from death:

The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins? We know that there are diseases in which occur total cessations of all the apparent functions of vitality, and yet in which these cessations are merely suspensions, properly so called. They are only temporary pauses in the incomprehensible mechanism. A certain period elapses, and some unseen mysterious principle again sets in motion the magic pinions and the wizard Wheels. The silver cord was not for ever loosed, nor the golden bowl irreparably broken. But where, meantime, was the soul (6, p. 258)?

"Marginalia" (1844) also contains Poe's speculations that death resembles "the point of blending between wakefulness and sleep" (1, p. 537). While in this suspended state, one is aware of "fancies, of exquisite delicacy" (1, p. 536). It is difficult, says Poe, to define such "fancies," however, which are not thoughts, and to which, as yet, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word fancies at random, and merely because I must use some word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the
shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychical than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquility—when the bodily and mental health are in perfection—and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these 'fancies' only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable point of time—yet it is crowded with these 'shadows of shadows'; and for absolute thought there is demanded time's endurance (1, p. 536).

Poe asserts that at times he is able to startle himself from the point into wakefulness—and thus transfer the point itself into the realm of memory—convey its impressions, or more properly their recollections, to a situation where (although still for a very brief period) I can survey them with the eye of analysis (1, p. 537).

Poe's tales provide evidence of a profound interest in mesmerism, and one may note several correlations between Poe's speculations on death and certain scientific descriptions of the mesmeric trance. The ideas of F. A. Mesmer, a Viennese physician, provided the earliest foundation of what has become the modern theory of hypnosis (5, p. 70). Mesmer believed that there existed a "superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies" and that sickness was caused by an obstacle which blocked the fluid's path through the body. The patient could be cured by mesmerizing or "messaging the body's 'poles' and thereby overcoming the obstacle, inducing a 'crisis,' often in the form of convulsions, and restoring health or the 'harmony' of man with nature" (2, p. 4). Some crises were very violent, whereas others took the form of a
deep sleep during which many patients believed they could communicate with the dead through an internal sixth sense. This "sixth sense" was the forerunner of what psychologists now call extrasensory perception (2, pp. 8-10). In his tales Poe apparently draws on Mesmer's theories to suggest that the sensations the individual experiences while in the mesmeric trance closely resemble those one undergoes at death. In a letter to James Russell Lowell, Poe states:

The unparticled matter, permeating and impelling, all things, is God. Its activity is the thought of God—which creates. Man, and other thinking beings, are individualizations of the unparticled matter. Man exists as a 'person' by being clothed with matter (the particled matter) which individualizes him. Thus habited, his life is rudimental. What we call 'death' is the painful metamorphosis. . . . At death, the worm is the butterfly—still material, but of a matter unrecognized by our organs—recognized, occasionally, perhaps, by the sleep-waker, directly—without organs—through the mesmeric medium. Thus a sleep-waker may see ghosts. Divested of the rudimental covering, the being inhabits space—what we suppose to be the immaterial universe—passing everywhere, and acting all things, by mere volition—cognizant of all secrets but that of the nature of God's volition—the motion, or activity, of the unparticled matter (1, p. 545, italics added).

Most of Poe's ideas about death involve comparisons between the experience of dying, with the subsequent passage into the after-life, and the experience of awakening from a swoon, in which the victim is neither fully conscious nor unconscious, asleep nor awake. It is interesting to note also that several of Poe's tales which contain speculations on death follow a pattern in which Poe alternates his speculations on the experience of death with his ideas on
the after-life. Such a pattern is clearly evident in the early tales especially.

In "MS Found in a Bottle" (1833), for example, Poe considers the possibility that death is a means of entry into the realm of "discovery" and supernatural knowledge. The narrator sets out on a sea voyage as a cure for "a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted him as a fiend" (6, p. 118). As the simoon approaches, the narrator, who is not easily swayed by superstition, is filled with a sense of impending doom. After the storm passes, he learns that he and the Old Swede are the only survivors. At the end of five days, it becomes clear that there is no hope of survival as darkness surrounds them. The Old Swede is terrified by the "thick gloom" and the "black sweltering desert of ebony" (6, p. 121). The narrator silently wonders what will take place, but seeing there is apparently no escape, he becomes calm and prepares himself for the destruction to come. As the narrator waits for death, "stupendous seas" hit the deck and "at times he and the Swede became dizzy with the velocity of their descent into some watery hell, where the air grew stagnant, and no sound disturbed the slumbers of the kraken" (6, p. 121). Then, suddenly, the narrator is catapulted onto the mystery ship as it hits the remains of his own vessel. The silence of the crew of the mystery ship, the crew's refusal to notice the narrator, and their interest in ancient maps and charts
all seem to suggest that the crew are spirits. While considering his fate, the narrator

unwittingly daubed with a tar-brush the edges of a neatly-folded studding-sail which lay near [him] on a barrel. The studding-sail is now bent upon the ship, and the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word DISCOVERY (6, p. 123).

Though the narrator believes that the ship is "surely doomed to hover continually upon the brink of eternity, without taking the final plunge into the abyss," he knows that if the ship should plunge to the bottom, he will possess "some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-impacted secret, whose attainment is destruction" (6, pp. 124-125). Once he possesses this knowledge, he cannot return. He cannot tell the reader what lies beyond the DISCOVERY.

"The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (1839) illustrates another of Poe's notions about death. Poe's characters, having passed through death, imply that it is a state of suspension which precedes the entrance into the after-life. In the opening lines Charmion, who has entered the after-life before Eiros, greets him upon his arrival:

Charmion ... I rejoice to see you looking life-like and rational. The film of the shadow has already passed from off your eyes. Be of heart, and fear nothing. Your allotted days of stupor have expired; and, to-morrow, I will myself induct you into the full joys and wonders of your novel existence.

Eiros. True, I feel no stupor, none at all. The wild sickness and the terrible darkness have left me, and I hear no longer that mad, rushing, horrible sound, like the 'voice of many waters.' Yet my senses are bewildered, Charmion, with the keeness of their perception of the new.
Charmion. A few days will remove all this;--but I fully understand you, and feel for you. It is now ten earthly years since I underwent what you undergo, yet the remembrance of it hangs by me still. You have now suffered all of pain, however, which you will suffer in Aidenn (6, p. 452).

As the two lovers converse, Eiros relates his conception of the end of the world. Following the pattern set in his earlier tales, Poe returns to his conjectures about death as the passageway into the world of discovery and knowledge; however, there is a slight deviation from the earlier pattern, for this tale contains his speculations on the after-life as well as on death's role in discovery and the attainment of knowledge. Eiros implies that the attainment of knowledge begins with curiosity. As the end of the world approaches, a strange comet will appear, and men will become curious about it. "They will groan for perfected knowledge. Truth will arise in the purity of her strength and exceeding majesty, and the wise will bow and adore" (6, p. 454). As knowledge increases, they will become terrified. Eiros believes that when the end is near, men will discuss the changes which take place in the atmosphere, and, as a result of their discussions, "an electric thrill of the intensest terror will run through the universal heart of man" (6, p. 456).

In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841), the victim only glimpses knowledge because he does not take the death-plunge to the bottom of the swirling water. The old seaman, trying to convince the narrator that he speaks the truth
about the fury of the maelstrom, tells the story of an experience which he and his two brothers had had with the whirling water. When it was evident that their boat was headed for the maelstrom, the seaman was terrified.

'No one ever will know what my feelings were at that moment. I shook from head to foot as if I had had the most violent fit of the ague. I knew what he meant by that one word well enough—I knew what he wished to make me understand. With the wind that now drove us on, we were bound for the whirl of the Strom, and nothing could save us' (6, p. 134).

But as the boat entered the whirlpool, the victim's fear was overcome by intense curiosity:

'It may appear strange, but now, when we were in the very jaws of the gulf, I felt more composed than when we were only approaching it. Having made up my mind to hope no more, I got rid of a great deal of that terror which unmanned me at first. I supposed it was despair that strung my nerves.

'It may look like boasting—but what I tell you is truth—I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power. I do believe that I blushed with shame when this idea crossed my mind. After a little while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a wish to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see' (6, pp. 135-136).

Only through experience can one truly know. Unfortunately, in undergoing such an experience, he may die and be unable to pass on his knowledge to others. But the seaman's case is different. When curiosity overcomes his fear, he coolly and objectively examines the maelstrom's shape and velocity
and observes that a cylindrical object does not descend as rapidly as others in the whirlpool. Lashing himself to the water cask, the seaman casts himself overboard and saves his life. Though he comes close to the secrets of death, he does not gain and therefore cannot relate the full knowledge found in the death-plunge.

"The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841), like "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," also contains Poe's speculations on the nature of the death-experience and the passage into the after-life. Speaking from beyond the grave, Monos and Una compare their previous conceptions of death and the actual death-experience. While they lived in the temporal life, Monos and Una had often discussed death. But Monos has learned the meaning of the universe only after "Death himself resolved for the secret" (6, p. 444). Una asks Monos to describe his own "passage through the dark Valley and Shadow" (6, p. 444). She tells him to

commence with that sad, sad instant when, the fever having abandoned you, you sank into a breathless and motionless torpor, and I pressed down your pallid eyelids with the passionate fingers of love (6, p. 445).

Like Charmion, who describes it as a "stupor," Una refers to death as a "motionless torpor." Una's description of death is echoed by Monos:

After some few days of pain, and many of dreamy delirium replete with ecstasy, the manifestations of which you mistook for pain, while I longed but was impotent to undeceive you--after some days there came upon me, as you have said, a breathless and motionless torpor; and this was termed Death by those who stood around me (6, p. 447).
Monos adds that only through the analogy of sleep can a living person imagine the sensation of dying. Poe is concerned with the similarity between the experience of death as the passage into the after-life and the awakening experience of a sleeper,

who, having slumbered long and profoundly, lying motionless and fully prostrate in a midsummer noon, begins to steal slowly back into consciousness, through the mere sufficiency of his sleep, and without being awakened by external disturbances (6, p. 447).

After his death, Monos, like the sleeper, experiences an acuteness of the senses. He recalls the rosewater which Una used to moisten his lips when he was ill with the fever. Although his eyes cannot "roll in their sockets," he is able to see "with more or less distinctness" anything which comes "within range of the visual hemisphere . . ." (6, p. 448). He is also able to remember that Una touched his eyelids. Monos undergoes little pain but a great deal of pleasure. Both the pain and the pleasure are the experiences of a mortal. Monos can also recall Una's crying over his body, but her sobs reach him as "soft musical sounds and no more . . ." (6, p. 448). Those who ready him for the grave appear to him as "forms," but he recognizes Una, who is dressed in a white robe (6, p. 448).

A "sixth sense" is added to the other five. Monos is aware of his environment but does not see or hear it. This sense is so acute that he can distinguish between the clocks, though he cannot hear their ticking. He can separate man's
"duration" from "any succession of events" which men usually think of as signifying Time. Through his "sixth sense" his soul takes the first step "upon the threshold of the temporal Eternity" of waiting to be "reborn" into the after-life (6, p. 449). Lying in the coffin, Monos is struck by "a dull shock like that of electricity . . ." (6, p. 450). This shock he terms "the hand of the deadly Decay" (6, p. 450).

For a year, the soul effortlessly watches time pass and gradually becomes less aware of being and more aware of place. "The narrow space immediately surrounding what had been the body, was now going to be the body itself" (6, p. 450).

Finally, Una joins him in the grave. Monos compares his awareness of Una's arrival in the grave to the semiconscious state of a deep sleeper when something disturbs his sleep:

At length, as often happens to the sleeper (by sleep and its world alone is Death imagined)—at length, as sometimes happened on Earth to the deep slumberer, when some flitting light half startled him into awaking, yet left him half enveloped in dreams—so to me, in the strict embrace of the Shadow, came that light which alone might have had power to startle—the light of enduring Love (6, p. 450).

After Una is placed in the grave, everything is void. Now that his body is fully decayed, the sense of being entirely leaves Monos, but a sense of Place and Time remains:

For that which was not—for that which had no form—for that which had no thought—for that which had no sentience—for that which was soulless, yet of which matter formed no portion—for all this nothingness, yet for all this immortality, the grave was still a home, and the corrosive hours, co-mates (6, p. 451).
Monos and Una believe that the only hope of survival in a world which man has "infected" is to be spiritually "born again." They must wait a hundred years in the grave before their rebirth into a state of awareness in the after-life.

Eric W. Carlson indicates that "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" is illustrative of Poe's conjectures about man's psychic identity and its union with the "general consciousness." Monos and Una, in "the process of being 'born again,'" pass from a sleep-like 'death' of the body to a synesthetic and acute sensory perception, without any accompanying moral feeling, to the experience of 'duration' and 'place' and 'Love,' and finally to total loss of the sense of being, self-identity becoming 'nothingness' and it merges with that vast immortality, 'Place and Time' (1, p. xxviii).

Poe renews his ideas about the nature of man's passage through death to the after-life in his prose poem "Eureka" (1848), in which he examines the various stages through which man passes as he becomes aware of his existence. During his youth, man does not question the feeling that we exist. . . . We understand it thoroughly. That there was a period at which we did not exist--or, that it might so have happened that we never had existed at all--are the considerations, indeed, which during this youth, we find difficulty in understanding. Why we should not exist, is, up to the epoch of our Manhood, of all queries the most unanswerable. Existence--self-existence--existence from all Time and to all Eternity--seems, up to the epoch of Manhood, a normal and unquestionable condition: --seems, because it is (1, p. 553).

With the passage of many ages, man's sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness--that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognise his existence as that of Jehovah (1, p. 554).
In "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842) Poe examines the similarity between the experience of dying and the experience of awakening from the swoon when man is neither conscious nor unconscious and is neither "in the deepest slumber . . . in delirium . . . in a swoon . . . nor in death . . ." (6, p. 247). In the tale, Poe's narrator recalls his horrifying experience with the Spanish Inquisition. After long interrogations, he "was sick—sick unto death with that long agony . . ." (6, p. 246). As his senses left him, he could not distinguish sounds because "the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum" (6, p. 246). Though, for some time he was still able to see, everything was "an exaggeration." He vividly recalls the white, moving lips of the judges with no sound coming from their lips. He remembers the sable draperies and the seven tall candles. Because his vision was blurred as he passed in and out of various stages of consciousness, he at first thought the candles were angels of mercy. Then, as his sight cleared, he realized they were only candles and therefore unable to help him. The shock of regaining clarity of vision nauseated him, and he felt "every fibre in [his] frame thrill as if [he] had touched the wire of a galvanic battery . . ." (6, p. 246). The "thrill" resembles the "electric" shock which Poe associates with death in several other tales. The prisoner looks forward to the restfulness to be found in the grave. As his senses leave him, he, like the seaman in "A Descent into the Maelstrom," plunges into the abyss.
... the figures of the judge vanished, as if magically, from before him; the tall candles sank into nothingness; their flames went out utterly; the blackness of darkness supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades. Then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe (6, pp. 246-247).

Harry Levin defines the narrator's suspension state as a period of unconsciousness with five stages—the swoon, the dream, delirium, madness, and "the definitive blackout" (4, p. 152). In referring to the narrator's condition as "a period of unconsciousness," Levin overlooks the narrator's statement that he "had swooned; but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost" (6, p. 247). The prisoner believes that the return to complete consciousness from the swoon consists of two states; "first, that of the sense of mental or spiritual; secondly, that of the sense of physical, existence" (6, p. 247). Poe wonders about one's ability, upon reaching the second stage, to remember the impressions of the first. If such a memory were possible, man might gain an insight into the "gulf beyond." The difficulty lies in distinguishing "its shadows from those of the tomb" (6, p. 247). It appears that the gulf beyond the tomb and the gulf or abyss of knowledge are joined in death. Through the swoon's similarity to death, the narrator comes close to knowledge but cannot bring it back because he is unable to recall the first stage of his awakening from the swoon. Sometime later he receives glimpses of the first stage as he
finds strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coal that glow . . . beholds floating in mid-air the sad visions that the many may now view; . . . ponders over the perfume of some novel flower . . . His brain grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence which has never before arrested his attention (6, p. 247).

The narrator recalls a period of "seeming unconsciousness" when tall figures carry him to the dungeon, and "a hideous dizziness oppressed him at the mere idea of the interminableness of the descent" (6, p. 247). He experiences "a sense of sudden motionlessness throughout all things; as if those who bore him (a ghastly train!) had outrun, in their descent, the limits of the limitless, and paused from the wearisomeness of their toil" (6, p. 247). He recalls also the flatness and dampness of his prison, and then "all is madness--the madness of a memory which busies itself among forbidden things" (6, p. 247). Suddenly, he is aware of the motion and sound of a beating heart, and then "all is blank" (6, p. 247). Again he becomes aware of the beating heart, and then his whole body tingles as consciousness begins to return. The tingling of the body seems to suggest again the "electric" shock which Poe often mentions in connection with the death-experience, the sensation of awakening in the after-life following a long period in the grave. The narrator becomes aware of his existence, and as he starts to think and try to comprehend his "true state," a full memory of the trial and the swoon returns.

David H. Hirsch feels that Poe does not have a purpose
reader to distinguish between states of consciousness and unconsciousness (3, p. 653). But Hirsch seems to have missed an important point. The strength of Poe's tale lies in the narrator's ability to vacillate quickly between periods of consciousness and unconsciousness. During the time when the physical body is neither fully conscious nor unconscious, the soul is aware of its existence; thus, Poe preserves the continuity of psychic identity. Poe's interest is in speculating on the sensation accompanying the fall into unconsciousness and the eventual return to consciousness.

In addition to being a story of transmigration, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844) is also illustrative of Poe's speculations on death. At the beginning of the tale, the narrator points out that the doctor, a disciple of Mesmer, tries to alleviate "the acute pains of his patient" through the use of "magnetic remedies" (6, p. 680). Gradually, Dr. Templeton wins Bedloe's confidence, and because of a very close relationship which now exists between them, Bedloe agrees to submit to numerous experiments. After several failures, the doctor finally succeeds in fully mesmerizing his patient, whose will

succumbed rapidly to that of the physician, so that, when [the narrator] first became acquainted with the two, sleep was brought about almost instantaneously by the mere volition of the operator, even when the invalid was unaware of his presence (6, p. 680).

Bedloe, a morphine addict, is very "sensitive, excitable, and enthusiastic;" possesses a "vigorous" and "creative"
imagination; and very often takes long walks in the Ragged Mountains. Upon returning from one of his solitary walks, the patient tells the narrator and the doctor about his remarkable adventure. As a result of the morphine, Bedloe has an intense interest in everything about him, including the leaves, the wind, and the odors of the forest. Feeling that he is perhaps the first man to travel in this part of the mountains, he is startled by a beating drum, a half-naked man running in the forest, and a hyena darting through the fog. Seeing the hyena leads Bedloe to believe that he has been dreaming. He washes his face and hands in an effort "to arouse himself to waking consciousness" (6, p. 682). Soon he finds himself at the foot of a high mountain; and looking down into the valley, he sees "an Eastern-looking city," similar to the cities found in the Arabian Tales (6, p. 682). Bedloe enters the city, becomes involved in a skirmish, and is struck on the right temple by a poisoned arrow. After the arrow strikes Bedloe's temple, "For many minutes . . . his sole sentiment—his sole feeling—was that of darkness and nonentity, with the consciousness of death" (6, pp. 684-685). After a while, Bedloe thinks he experiences "a violent and sudden shock through his soul, as if of electricity" (6, p. 685). Accompanying this "sudden shock" is the sense of "elasticity and of light" (6, p. 685). The soul rises from the body and, being unconcerned with the disfigured corpse, flits "buoyantly out of the city,
retracing the circuitous path by which \textit{Bedloe} had entered it" (6, p. 685). When the soul reaches the exact spot where the hyena had appeared while Bedloe was walking in the hills on his journey into the city, he undergoes a second "electrical" shock, and the sense of "volition" and substance returns. Bedloe then becomes his "original self" and starts home. Poe seems to suggest here once again that the "electrical" shock which Bedloe experiences is the same sensation that the body experiences at death and at the passage into the after-life.

After Bedloe concludes his account of his adventure in the hills, the doctor produces a water-color drawing of his friend Oldeb, an army officer who died in a battle in the Indian city of Benares, and who bore a striking resemblance to Bedloe. It is also interesting to note that the name Bedloe is the name Oldeb reversed with the silent e dropped. Speaking to Bedloe and the narrator, the doctor points out that he was at home, writing down the account of Oldeb's death "at the very period in which \textit{Bedloe} fancied these things amid the hills" (6, p. 686). It is possible that while the doctor is writing, Bedloe is in a mesmeric trance and is thus neither unconscious nor fully conscious, asleep nor awake. As a result of the close rapport between the doctor and his patient, Bedloe possibly receives the account of Oldeb's death through his "sixth sense" or through extrasensory perception. The invalid imagines that he, like the army officer Oldeb, is struck by an arrow and that his soul
momentarily leaves his body and returns. Both Bedloe and Templeton hint that the events in the mountains might be the result of some unusual phenomena. Bedloe suggests that the vision which occurs to him is not a dream, and he must therefore "class it among other phenomena" (6, p. 683). Templeton also observes that "In this I am not sure that you are wrong" (6, p. 683).

"Mesmeric Revelation" (1844) contains further insight into Poe's speculations about the nature of death. Poe's narrator describes mesmerism as "an abnormal condition, in which the phenomena resemble very closely those of death, or at least resemble them more nearly than they do the phenomena of any other normal condition within our cognizance . . ." (6, p. 88). Mr. Vankirk, the patient, echoes the narrator:

If I were awake I should like to die, but now it is no matter. The mesmeric condition is so near death as to content me (6, p. 90).

After several moments of discussion, the narrator again questions Vankirk about the similarity between death and his present state:

P. [the narrator] You have often said that the mesmeric state very nearly resembles death. How is this?

V. When I say that it resembles death, I mean that it resembles the ultimate life; for when I am entranced the senses of my rudimental life are in abeyance, and I perceive external things directly, without organs, through a medium which I shall employ in the ultimate, unorganized life.

P. Unorganized?
V. Yes; organs are contrivances by which the individual is brought into sensible relation with particular classes and forms of matter, to the exclusion of other classes and forms. The organs of man are adapted to his rudimental condition, and to that only; his ultimate condition, being unorganized, is of unlimited comprehension in all points but one—the nature of the volition of God—that is to say, the motion of the unparticled matter. You will have a distinct idea of the ultimate body by conceiving it to be entire brain. This it is not; but a conception of this nature will bring you near a comprehension of what it is. A luminous body imparts a vibration to the luminiferous ether. The vibrations generate similar ones within the retina; these again communicate similar ones to the optic nerve. The nerve conveys similar ones to the brain; the brain, also, similar ones to the unparticled matter which permeates it. The motion of this latter is thought, of which perception is the first undulation. This is the mode by which the mind of the rudimental life communicates with the external world; and this external world is, to the rudimental life, limited, through the idiosyncrasy of its organs. But in the ultimate, unorganized life, the external world reaches the whole body, (which is of a substance having affinity to brain, as I have said,) with no other intervention than that of an infinitely rarer ether than even the luminiferous; and to this ether—in unison with it—the whole body vibrates, setting in motion the unparticled matter which permeates it. It is to the absence of idiosyncratic organs, therefore, that we must attribute the nearly unlimited perception of the ultimate life. To rudimental beings, organs are the cages necessary to confine them until fledged (6, pp. 93-94).

"The Power of Words" (1845) is apparently a conversation between two spirits in the after-life who discuss the state of any spirit just entering the after-life. Agathos tells Oinos that even in the after-life knowledge is not "a thing of intuition" but must be acquired (6, p. 440). He remarks that

Ah, not in knowledge is happiness, but in the acquisition of knowledge! In for ever knowing, we are for ever blessed; but to know all, were the curse of a fiend (6, p. 440).
His remarks indicate a reference to the continuity of psychic identity. As they peer into the "abysmal distances" of knowledge, the spirits suggest that the "thirst to know" is "for ever unquenchable within the soul"—since to quench it, would be to extinguish the soul's self" (6, p. 440).

Again, in "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), apparently one of his best hoaxes, Poe speculates on the possibility of determining "for how long a period the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process" of mesmerism (6, p. 96). The patient M. Valdemar, like Bedloe, is an excellent subject for mesmerism because he is "markedly nervous" (6, p. 96). When the narrator arrives at Valdemar's bedside, he finds the patient in this condition:

His face wore a leaden hue; the eyes were utterly lustreless; and the emaciation was so extreme, that the skin has been broken through by the cheek-bones. His expectoration was excessive. The pulse was barely perceptible. He retained, nevertheless, in a very remarkable manner, both his mental power and a certain degree of physical strength. He spoke with distinctness—took some palliative medicines without aid—and, when the narrator entered the room, was occupied in penciling memoranda in a pocket-book (6, p. 97).

As the narrator begins the process of mesmerism, the patient's pulse is "imperceptible," and his breathing is stertorous. Fifteen minutes later the stertorous breathing is no longer perceptible, and the limbs become cold. Sometime later, however, the narrator notices that the mesmeric trance is beginning to have some effect on Valdemar. "The glassy roll of the eye was changed for that expression of uneasy inward
examination which is never seen except in cases of sleep-waking, and which is quite impossible to mistake" (6, p. 99). Although the patient's body is cold and rigid, his "general appearance is certainly not that of death" (6, p. 99). Opening his eyes, Valdemar utters the words "asleep now" (6, p. 100). Yet, he is neither asleep nor awake, dead nor alive, but in a state of suspension. The second time the narrator asks Valdemar if he is asleep, the patient replies that he has been sleeping, but now he is dying (6, p. 100). Although the patient turns very pale and resembles the dead, he still answers the narrator's questions. Again when the narrator asks him if he is sleeping, Valdemar replies by stating that he has been sleeping but now he is dead (6, p. 101). For seven months he remains in this state of suspension. Although the patient insists he is dead, his ability to speak leads the mesmerist to believe that there is still life in the patient's body. It is possible that the mesmeric trance prevents the final lapse of the body into death. As the narrator begins to awaken the patient from his trance, Valdemar speaks: "For God's sake!-quick!-quick!-put me to sleep--or, quick!-waken me!--quick!-I say to you that I am dead" (6, p. 103)! When the narrator tries to bring Valdemar out of the trance, Valdemar's whole frame at once--within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk--crumbled--absolutely rotted away beneath the mesmerist's hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome--of detestable putrescence (6, p. 103).
Although the experiment is temporarily successful in the retardation of the process of decay, the patient is aware, perhaps through a "sixth sense," of the gradual submission of his body to death.

In some of his tales Poe examines the nature of death. Only through death can man fully enter the world of discovery and supernatural knowledge. Death is the transitional state of suspension which man undergoes before entrance into the after-life. Poe compares the death-experience to the awakening from a sleep or from a swoon and to the individual's reaction to mesmerism. All the tales dealing with the state of suspension illustrate Poe's interest in the experience of dying. In other tales Poe is concerned with the horrifying effect of burial alive on the victim.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER IV

PREMATURE BURIAL

In Poe's fiction the victim of premature burial is characterized by an intense desire to live. The driving force struggling for survival is the "psychic identity" or "soul." Poe's interest in the real and imagined terrors of living burial seems to center on the relationship between the "psychic identity" and death. The victim of sudden death does not undergo the horrifying experience of one who, believed to be dead, is buried alive and must slowly wait for death to come. The emotional strain and horror of facing a long, agonizing suffocation in the tomb cause a mounting fear, panic, and desperation in the victim of premature burial. But Poe's concern is with the effect of the terrors of burial alive on both the victim and on the imaginative reader. The narrator of "The Premature Burial" (1844) describes it as "beyond question, the most terrific of . . . extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality" (3, p. 258).

No event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death. The unendurable oppression of the lungs—the stifling fumes of the damp earth—the clinging to the death garments—the rigid embrace of the narrow house—the blackness of the absolute Night—the silence like a sea that overwhelms—the unseen but palpable presence of the Conquerer Worm—these things, with the thoughts of the air and grass above, the memory of dear friends who would fly to save us if but informed of our fate, and with
consciousness that of this fate they can never be informed—that our hopeless portion is that of the really dead—these considerations, I say, carry into the heart, which still palpitates, a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil. We know of nothing so agonizing upon Earth—we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost Hell (3, pp. 262-263).

Only incidentally evident in "Berenice," Poe's interest in premature burial increases in "The Cask of Amontillado" and dominates "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Premature Burial." In each tale he presents a slightly more complicated approach, and the terrifying effect of burial alive on the victim and the reader gradually builds with each tale.

"Berenice" (1835) deals primarily with the psychological relationship between the introvert Egaeus, who, born in a library, has spent his life surrounded by books, and his extrovert cousin, the beautiful Berenice. In this tale Poe is apparently more concerned with the concluding shock of realization that the horror of the painful extraction of teeth provides than he is with burial alive, for Berenice, buried while she is in a cataleptic trance, is not conscious of the horrors of burial alive; therefore, the reader is given little opportunity to identify with her. She undergoes no terror or suffering during the brief period of her entombment. It is only when her cousin, obsessed with her perfectly formed teeth, begins to rip them out that she awakens and screams with pain. When the servant enters the library to relate the events of the night, the presence of
the spade in the corner indicates that Egaeus had dug up the living Berenice.

Poe's treatment of the theme of premature burial is much more complex in "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) than in "Berenice," for unlike Egaeus's cousin, Fortunato is conscious while he is in the tomb, and the reader identifies more easily with the situation of the victim; but, though it is evident that Fortunato will be left to suffocate, the emotional impact on the reader of the horrors of burial alive is lessened by Fortunato's obstinate courage in facing death.

The key to this tale lies in Montresor's reason for killing Fortunato—revenge for some unknown wrong. Although revenge is apparently Montresor's reason for killing Fortunato, neither the reader nor Fortunato knows the exact nature of the victim's crime. Montresor makes it clear that he does not tell Fortunato of his crime or threaten him when he says, "You, who so well knew the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat" (3, p. 274).

All the events in the tale lead to the climax—the failure of Montresor's revenge. Unlike the victim in "The Premature Burial," Fortunato does not survive living burial, but personal or family pride seems to give Fortunato the courage to refrain from pleading for mercy. He refuses to give Montresor the sadistic pleasure of hearing his cries. Fortunato's last words, "For the love of God, Montresor," disappoint Montresor, who repeats Fortunato's words
'Yes,' I said, 'for the love of God!'

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud:

'Fortunato!'

No answer. I called again:

'Fortunato!'

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs (3, p. 279).

It is possible that not only the dampness of the catacombs, but also Fortunato's obstinate silence causes the sickness Montresor feels.

A third tale, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), reflects Poe's increased interest in the theme of burial alive. In this tale the victim, her brother, the narrator, and the reader are all affected by the horrors of premature burial. Joseph Gold believes that Roderick, who turns pale in Madeline's presence, is not afraid of death, but of "survival-in-death" or living burial because "he dreads the torments of the 'eternity' that awaits the unlucky survivor of premature burial" (1, p. 75). Gold also believes that Madeline

must be viewed as the physical incarnation, the symbolic equivalent of her brother's thought of premature burial. She is Roderick's twin sister, his alter ego, or 'secret sharer,' and the timing and manner of her first appearance in the story force us to view her as personifying the unconscious fear in the mind of Usher himself (1, p. 75).

As evidence of Roderick's preoccupation with premature burial, Gold cites Poe's reference to Roderick's picture of the tomb with its "ghastly glow that comes from no visible source,"
which seems to indicate that life will continue in the tomb, the use of the word entombed in "The Haunted Palace," and the title of Roderick's favorite book, Offices of the Dead. Gold believes that if Madeline dies, Usher "would be free from his fear of premature burial, for he would have received undeniable proof that burial and death are synonymous" (1, p. 75).

As Roderick and the narrator place Madeline in the tomb, they discover that they could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death (3, pp. 240-241).

The reader is, therefore, given a hint that Madeline is alive. Several days after Madeline's burial, the narrator begins to notice changes taking place in Roderick:

His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue--but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I [the narrator] thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the more inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound (3, p. 241).
Gradually and progressively the narrator becomes increasingly nervous and suffers from insomnia. He appears subconsciously aware of Madeline's struggles in the tomb, for during the storm, he believes he hears "certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals..." (3, p. 241). Hoping to calm Usher, who is awakened by the storm, the narrator reads from an ancient volume. Suddenly, the narrator becomes "aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled, reverberation" and rushes to Roderick's chair (3, p. 244). Usher admits that he has heard the sounds for several days but "dared not speak!" He believes that they "have put her living in the tomb" (3, p. 245)! Poe here uses the excited confessions of Roderick Usher to suggest to the imagination of the reader Madeline's struggles in the tomb. Roderick had heard "her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin" followed by "the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault" (3, p. 245)! He also had heard "her footsteps on the stair" and "that heavy and horrible beating of her heart" (3, p. 245). He believes that his sister is even now standing outside the door:

'Madman'—here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—'Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!' As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous
and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing
gust—but then without these doors there did stand
the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline
of Usher (3, p. 245).

The reader, along with the narrator, is caught up in
Roderick's madness as he describes Madeline's escape from
the tomb. Poe's reader becomes actively involved in the
terrors of burial alive as he imagines the horror of
Madeline's awakening in the tomb.

No one really knows whether Madeline's return is real
or imaginary, for as always Poe offers his readers a choice.
Some readers believe that Madeline is truly dead when Roderick
places her in the tomb and that her "return" is an hallucination.
Others believe that she is in a cataleptic trance when buried
and that her return from the grave is real and not imaginary.
Poe's narrator states that Madeline suffered from "a gradual
wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient
affections of a partially cataleptical character . . ." (3,
p. 236). Floyd Stovall feels that because of a close
association with each other, Roderick and Madeline have
developed a common identity. Roderick believes so strongly
in this common identity that he will not accept the idea
that Madeline is dead while he is still alive (4, p. 419).

John S. Hill bases his belief that Madeline's return
is an hallucination on the following details: the lack of
oxygen in the vault as evidenced by the torches' inability
to burn properly, the copper-covered floor of the vault and
the passageway leading to it, the lid of the coffin which is
screwed down, the immense weight of the outer iron door
which could not be opened from within since it was fastened
from the outside, and the length of time before Madeline
"reappears" (2, p. 397). Hill points out that Poe does not
say Madeline has been buried alive but only suggests it
through his description of the color of her face and the
lingering smile. Hill believes that the reader is also
ready to accept the living Madeline's return because the
narrator is so quick to believe she is alive (2, p. 397).
By the end of the tale both Roderick, who is emotionally
unstable at the beginning of the tale, and the narrator, who
becomes emotionally unstable possibly because of his close
association with Roderick, have toppled over the brink of
sanity as a result of the extreme emotional stress associated
with Madeline's death. Because both characters have lost
control of their reasoning powers, Hill believes neither
Usher nor the narrator. It is Hill's contention that
Roderick only thinks he has put a living woman into the tomb.
In any event, the sensitive reader of Poe can not keep from
identifying with Madeline as she awakens in the tomb and,
driven by an intense will to survive, somehow forces her way
out of the vault. The "psychic identity" or will-to-live
refuses to allow Madeline to yield readily to death.

The tale "The Premature Burial" (1844) illustrates
still another aspect of Poe's interest in burial alive. It
is the only Poe story in which the reader imaginatively
joins the victim in the tomb, and there is even a surprise happy ending, for the shock of burial alive has a curative effect on the victim. Each example of premature burial that the narrator cites is so believable that the reader becomes easily convinced that the horrors of burial alive could also happen to him. Through the experience of Edward Stapleton, Poe is able to speculate on the sensation of being buried alive. Stapleton declares that at no period was he altogether insensible—that, dully and confusedly, he was aware of everything which happened to him, from the moment in which he was pronounced dead by his physicians, to that in which he fell swooning to the floor of the hospital. 'I am alive,' were the uncomprehended words which, upon recognizing the locality of the dissecting-room, he had endeavored in his extremity to utter (3, p. 262).

The narrator is intensely interested, for "subject to cataleptic seizures," he fears burial alive and dreams often that he sees the dead feebly struggling in their graves. He has his family vault equipped with many devices which seemingly would assure his escape if he were to be buried alive. For example, he has the vault remodeled so that the slightest pressure on "a long lever that extended far into the tomb would cause the iron portals to fly back" (3, p. 266). Air, light, food, and water are also readily available. The coffin is padded and also provided with a device for opening the door similar to the escape lever in the vault. Last, there is a large bell which hangs from the roof of the tomb. The bell's rope is to be fastened to one hand of
the corpse so that the slightest movement would cause the bell to ring.

Sometime later he awakens to find himself in a "coffin." He remembers nothing of what has apparently preceded his burial. He is overcome by "an electric shock of terror, deadly and indefinite, which sends the blood in torrents from the temples to the heart" (3, p. 266). Realizing that he is buried alive, he is filled with despair.

Despair—such as no other species of wretchedness ever calls into being—despair alone urged me, after long irresolution, to uplight the heavy lids of my eyes. I uplifted them. It was dark—all dark. I knew that the fit was over. I knew that the crisis of my disorder had long passed. I knew that I had now fully recovered the use of my visual faculties—and yet it was dark—all dark—the intense and utter raylessness of the Night that endureth for evermore (3, pp. 266-267).

 Darkness is everywhere, and he tries to cry out, "but no voice issued from the cavernous lungs, which, oppressed as if by the weight of some incumbent mountain, gasped and palpitated, with the heart, at every elaborate and struggling inspiration" (3, p. 267). He notices that his jaws are bound and his wrists crossed, which is the usual practice for preparing the dead for the tomb. His movements feel restricted, and he finds that there is a "solid wooden substance" about six inches from his head. Groping about for the precautionary devices he had placed in the family vault, he smells "the strong peculiar odor of moist earth" (3, p. 267). Failing to locate the devices, he concludes that he has had a cataleptic seizure far from home, and
is horrified that he may be "nailed up in some common coffin—and thrust, deep, deep, and for ever, into some ordinary and nameless grave" (3, p. 267). Hope now leaves him, and he is filled with despair as he becomes aware of the hideous darkness and closeness of the tomb. Again he attempts to cry out and this time succeeds. His wild shriek of agony brings an immediate response—gruff and exasperated workmen's voices and an unceremonious shaking—which fully restores his memory. He and a friend had gone on a "gunning expedition" near Richmond, Virginia, on the banks of the James River. A storm forced them to seek the only shelter available—"a small sloop lying at anchor in the stream, and laden with garden mould . . ." (3, p. 268). Having no other place to rest, Stapleton is forced to sleep in one of the ship's two berths which is only eighteen inches wide. In spite of the cramped conditions he slept soundly and he now believes that his vision

--for it was no dream, and no nightmare--arose naturally from the circumstances of my position--from my ordinary bias of thought--and from the difficulty, to which I have alluded, of collecting my senses, and especially of regaining my memory, for a long time after awakening from slumber (3, p. 268).

His memory fully restored, he realizes that his "coffin" is in reality the berth in which he is sleeping, the "earthy smell" of the tomb is coming from the ship's cargo, and the cloth that binds his jaws is the silk handkerchief he tied around his head to serve as a nightcap. The aftereffects of his "premature burial," however, are beneficial. He begins
to travel, take exercise, and think about other subjects than
death. He discards his medical books and reads no more
horror tales. Miraculously his cataleptic fits disappear.


CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

A close examination of Poe's tales shows clearly that he is not only a writer of horror stories but also a thinker of some depth, one of whose primary interests lies in the possibilities of the continuity of man's individuality or "psychic identity." Horror in Poe's tales provides suspense-filled enjoyment for his readers, but it also serves as a background for his speculations on the nature of the soul. Too often critics emphasize the plots of the stories while giving little attention to Poe's concern with the driving force within man which struggles for survival against seemingly overwhelming odds.

Although the approaches vary in all Poe's tales dealing with the concept of the continuity of psychic identity, the stories themselves are generally related as specific studies of different aspects of the central idea: (1) metempsychosis (or reincarnation and transmigration); (2) the state of suspension between "death" and the after-life, unconsciousness and consciousness, sleep and waking; and (3) the terrors, real or imagined, of premature burial. Poe makes no attempt to dictate to his readers; in each tale he leaves them with a choice of interpretation and the option of reading it on any one of several levels. Though usually read for pleasure--
suspense and horror—the tales contain a solid substructure of philosophical thought on the nature of the soul.

Poe is not afraid to introduce into his tales questions on the usually avoided subject of immortality. Edward H. Davidson believes that Poe seems to have been reminding his age that the symbols of death were frozen and meaningless. Christianity professed to teach the life after death. Christian ceremonial, grown stale with time and repetition, had gradually lost its force and, far from asserting that the grave is merely the entrance to another life, had become content to let the catafalque, the gravestone, or the mausoleum be the indestructible symbols of its belief in immortality (1, p. 108).

Though Poe seems not to have been interested in Christian doctrines of immortality per se, his speculations on the nature of the soul, the death experience, the after-life, and the continuity of psychic identity have added depth, dimension, and complexity to his supposedly slight and "entertaining" horror tales. Read on this level, he is indeed one of the earliest and best American writers of psychological fiction.
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