

When recounting his destruction of Fortunato, Montresor, the diabolical narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (1847), chooses a curious word to describe the murder that Fortunato cannot foresee: "I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his *immolation* [emphasis mine]." <sup>1</sup> "Immolation" denotes sacrifice, a very specific type of killing, and the fact that Montresor thinks of his murder as sacrificial could add much to our understanding of the story. Critics, however, have overlooked the importance of Montresor's peculiar categorization, which is the only overt mentioning of immolation in a related group of stories, each of which makes extensive use of the theme. Upon further examination, we will find that sacrifice emerges as a major trope in "Cask," "The Black Cat" (1843), and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). These, the most famous of Poe's tales of murder in the first-person, have encoded within them a type of sacrifice: the ancient Greek blood ritual.

The way Poe deploys this line of symbolism is complex; he has his narrators perform failed sacrifices. I should be clear in saying that the characters are not aware of the ritual framework around which their own stories are built. <sup>2</sup> These unsuccessful

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<sup>1</sup> *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 3. ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1978), 1257. Hereafter, Mabbott's *Poe* will be cited parenthetically, by volume and page number, within the text.

<sup>2</sup> Even Montresor, who directly refers to his crime as a sacrificial act, could not be cognizant of how his story refers to the ancient practice. He may call his act "immolation" in order to justify it to himself and his audience, but were he aware of how closely his murder follows the Greek blood ritual, only to be corrupted, he would be forced to say his act was merely an attempted immolation. Or, he could recognize this and simply be in denial, preferring to think of his act as bizarrely sacred, but not particularly related to the

rituals, there for the reader to decipher if he may, exist only as literary devices, symbols not imposed by the narrators on their worlds, but on the text by the author. The implications of this sacrificial motif are myriad, though this thesis will encompass three main thrusts that attempt to show how important the theme is to Poe's works. Before proceeding to a discussion of the stories themselves, I will examine the prevalence of classicism in nineteenth-century education. This section will have three aims: to give the reader enough information about the Greek sacrifice ritual so that it may be more easily recognized in the stories; to provide the reader with general information about the influence of classicism on education and culture in the early 1800s and to fit Poe's own education within these parameters; and to help historicize Poe's writing by showing the climate in which it existed, while implying that to use a sacrificial motif would have been to engage in an extremely popular and publicly resonant discourse. Following this will be a close reading of the stories that exposes the sacrificial theme that informs them.

The next section of this thesis will attempt to historicize Poe further by exploring how ancient Greek sacrifice as it appears in his texts situates him within American literary history. What I hope to do by the end of this essay is to pose Poe as a sort of literary missing link between the sentimentalists and the dark romantics or moderns. Though he died before the publication of the most successful sentimental novel of the nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), he is in some ways the literary successor of sentimentalism. His writing is decidedly not sentimental in the typical sense, but it does engage in a sort of "dark sentimentalism," exploring issues

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ancient Greek act. This is the simplest explanation, as it fits Montresor's character best while also allowing Poe's use of the theme to exist on a purely symbolic level.

like abolition and temperance while maintaining a different philosophy about the possibility of communication through writing. Poe's allusion to unsuccessful sacrifices is one of the ways by which he speaks to these social movements. At the same time, however, Poe is skeptical of the possibility of literature doing cultural work.

One of the basic assumptions on which sentimental writers rely is that their texts can serve the purpose that they wish them to in the real world; Poe refuses to accept this unquestioningly. Though allusion to the ancient Greek blood ritual is one way that Poe's stories engage the world around them, it is also a profound symbol for miscommunication. In the final section of my paper, which will be theoretically informed by Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," I will argue that failed sacrifice in Poe's work is symbolic of the author's recognition that his writing will take on a different meaning from that which he intended once it is disseminated to the public. Because of their implied concerns about writing and communication, Poe's works are a precursor to novels like Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). Failed sacrifices are also a gesture toward the type of ambiguity that Melville will achieve most completely in *Pierre* (1852). Though I do not devote a section specifically to this idea, it is my hope that uncovering this sacrificial motif in Poe's tales will also help to situate him as a proto-naturalist, concerned with the merging of the mind and the body, placing humans at the mercy of biological impulses that they cannot understand; this idea is implied throughout much of my analysis of the tales.

I begin with a discussion of classicism.

## II.

It is 1817. In a gallery of the British Museum, the diminutive 22-year-old John Keats walks the length of the Parthenon frieze, following the marble figures lined up in a sacrificial procession for the goddess Athena. He nods and smiles at a curious kid, Edgar Allan Poe, age 8, with his parents, John and Fanny. Whether or not such a chance encounter ever happened, to speculate that it did is not to engage in anachronism. The Allans lived in England from 1815-20, renting for at least part of this time a place at 47 Southampton Row, two streets over from the British Museum.<sup>3</sup> Keats, sufficiently moved by the exhibit to write “Sonnet on Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” must have seen Lord Elgin’s purloined artifacts after they were first displayed in the museum in 1817 and before his death in 1821.

Arthur Hobson Quinn notes that Poe was the lone American writer of his generation to have spent a significant amount of time in England as a child, and he sees Poe’s school in London as being the first environment to have a discernible effect on the author’s work.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Quinn speculates that the schoolhouse proper was not the only place Poe was learning in England: “Less tangible, of course, is the effect produced by the architecture, the public monuments, the survivals of past ages, which cannot have passed unnoticed by a boy like Edgar Poe.”<sup>5</sup> I will join Quinn with my own speculation: though Poe’s formal classical education would not begin for a few more years, his unofficial experience with the strange and mysterious world of ancient Greek forms

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1941), 65. Quinn believes the boarding school in “William Wilson” to be modeled after the one Poe attended as a child in London. See 74-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

probably began with seeing the Elgin Marbles, housed in the British Museum, less than a stone's throw away from his family's residence.

Shelley and Byron would have been just as likely as Keats to have greeted the Allan family while observing the Parthenon frieze and other wonders brought over from the Acropolis. The neoclassical influence on the British Romantics is well known. It manifested itself in their support for Greece in its war for independence, during which Byron died of fever while serving on the front lines, and even in their opposition to the Greek sculptures being extradited from their original setting. If it can be said that there was an international zeitgeist of the early nineteenth century, it was the influence of classicism.

Stateside, the effect of ancient Greece and Rome on the early American citizen, particularly the educated member of society, was palpable. Caroline Winterer, in her recent book *The Culture of Classicism* (2002), discusses the importance of the classics in shaping the minds of United States citizens, from the earliest days of the republic to the decline of classical influence at the end of the nineteenth century. Winterer's main argument is that initially ancient Rome was important to the idea of America as a republic, but it gave way in prominence to ancient Greece:

Ancient Greece, and more specifically, fifth-century B.C. Athens, grew in appeal as democracy itself became more palatable during the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet just as they embraced Greek democracy, Americans recruited classicism for a radically new purpose: antimodernism. Rather than looking to antiquity as a guide to the present,

they now looked to the remote past as a way to combat such cancers of modernity as materialism, civic decay, industrialization, and anti-intellectualism.<sup>6</sup>

The conceptualization of Greece served the early American as a bulwark against modernity and as a model for both a democratic and a slave-based agricultural society.<sup>7</sup> Because of advances in printing technology and the proliferation of printed materials, Americans were exposed to a variety of classical references in newspapers and pamphlets.<sup>8</sup> The art of oratory became increasingly popular and was a way that even the uneducated could be exposed to classical styles and authors.<sup>9</sup>

In the university classroom, the study of ancient languages moved from intense grammar lessons to a historical investigation of ancient texts, an attempt to place the great authors in the context of their times.<sup>10</sup> There is evidence that Poe was thoroughly trained under each of these pedagogies. We know that while at the University of Virginia Poe attended Professor George Long's ancient languages class, in which Long "required during each period one hundred lines from Virgil or Thucydides to be read, followed by translations from Horace or some other author, Greek or Latin."<sup>11</sup> Poe quite obviously was not a simple-minded reader of the skill-and-drill methodology, though, and he does not seem to have read merely as a way of learning grammatical structures and vocabulary

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<sup>6</sup>Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, especially pp. 44-76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> The oratorical circuit in which the Transcendentals and other famous writers of the American Renaissance participated are well known. For a helpful discussion of this tradition as it existed in America's infancy, see Winterer, 25-7.

<sup>8</sup> Winterer calls this shift a move from "words to worlds"; see especially pp. 77-98.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, 98.

words. Poe, as would have been expected of an educated person in his time, had a high level of familiarity with the primary texts of the ancients and the history that informed them.<sup>12</sup> Part of this intimate knowledge of the classics and the climate in which they were created is an understanding of ancient religion, of which sacrifice rituals were an important part.

Quinn claims that Poe read Charles Rollin's *Histoire Ancienne* and *Histoire Romaine*, namely the first, third, fourth, thirty-fourth, and thirty-fifth volumes of Rollin's *Oeuvres Complètes* (1807-10). Poe is on record as having checked out these texts from the University of Virginia library on 13 June and 8 August 1826.<sup>13</sup> Rollin's work was wildly popular. Although the first American edition of *Ancient History* did not come out until 1841, the book was in its eighteenth London edition by 1859. New American editions came out as late as 1879. That a book of this type could remain so prominent for over a century (the original French was published during the 1730s) speaks to the pervasiveness of classicism and its role in education in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Consider this excerpt from *The History of the Persians and Grecians*, which comes from *Ancient History*:

The order and manner of performing this sacrifice was as follows...they walked in a solemn procession, which was preceded by a trumpet that sounded to battle. Next to the trumpet marched several chariots, filled with crowns and branches of myrtle. After these chariots was led a black bull, behind which marched a company of young persons, carrying

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<sup>12</sup> This is particularly true of the aforementioned period in American classical scholarship, when Greece replaced Rome in importance and worlds replaced words, as Winterer might say.

<sup>13</sup> Quinn, 103. Poe apparently read the French version of Rollin's collected works.

pitchers in their hands full of wine and milk, the ordinary libation offered to the dead, and phials of oil and perfumes. All these young persons were freemen; for no slave was allowed to have any part in this ceremony, which was instituted for men who had lost their lives for liberty. In the rear of this procession followed the archon, or chief magistrate of the Platæans, for whom it was unlawful at any other time even so much as to touch iron, or to wear any other garment than a white one. But upon this occasion, being clad in purple raiment, having a sword by his side, and holding an urn in his hands, which he took from the place where they kept their public records, he marched through the city to the place where the tombs of his countrymen were erected. As soon as he came there, he drew water with his urn from the fountain, washed with his own hands the little columns that belonged to the tombs, rubbed them afterwards with essence, and then killed the bull upon a pile of wood prepared for that purpose. After having offered up prayers to the terrestrial Jupiter and Mercury, he invited those valiant souls deceased to come to their feast, and to partake of their funeral libations; then taking a cup in his hand, and having filled it with wine, he poured it out on the ground, and said with a loud voice:—*I present this cup to those valiant men, who died for the liberty of the Grecians.* These ceremonies were annually performed even in the time of



Plutarch.<sup>14</sup>

This is a typical Greek sacrifice routine, and it shows us the crucial components of successful blood rituals: the procession is highly ornate and public; libations are made to the gods; the bull's throat is cut and his blood is spilled at the altar. Certain aspects of the above sacrifice bear a striking resemblance to the events of "Cask," as we will see later. For now, I wish to emphasize that Poe read historical works that achieved a fair amount of popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and these works likely contributed to his understanding of ancient literature and culture.

A classical education meant being well versed in primary texts written by the ancients themselves. In reading Poe's essays, one must realize that he had more than a peremptory understanding of these classical works. He repeatedly refers to the writings of Aeschylus, particularly *Prometheus Bound*.<sup>15</sup> The *Marginalia* of December 1844 indicates his knowledge of Porphyry's works.<sup>16</sup> In a review of *The Classical Family Library's Euripides*, he evinces knowledge of the intricacies of Greek tragedy and a familiarity with writers such as Sophocles, Horace, and Aristotle.<sup>17</sup> The point that Poe was well read in this way should not be belabored, as any educated man of letters of Poe's time would have been expected to have known the tracts and speeches of the ancient Greek tragedians and philosophers. What should be noted, however, is that Poe

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Rollin, *Ancient History*, vol. 1, first complete American ed., trans. James Bell (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841), 230. The excerpt appears in book VI, volume I of the 1841 edition, but would have been in volume III of the French, which Poe likely read.

<sup>15</sup> See Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 248-50, 523, 1398.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1336.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-50. Additionally, Poe's apocalyptic short story "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" begins with an epigraph—"I will bring fire to thee"—from Euripides (II, 455). For the prevalence of Greek tragedy in the college classroom, see Winterer, 92-8.

was knowledgeable about ancient writers whose works show a special concern with sacrifice rituals.

The primary source for the religious myth behind sacrifice is Hesiod's *Theogony*. Poe never mentions this work explicitly in his writings, though it would be unfathomable to think that he was unfamiliar with it, if for no other reason than its importance to understanding other classical works, like those of Aeschylus, which we know Poe read. In the *Theogony*, Prometheus deceives Zeus, tricking him into choosing the worst parts of an ox for himself, with the implication being that this is the portion that the race of men must sacrifice to him. Prometheus' deception creates a system in which men get the edible parts of animals, while only having to burn the bones of the beast in order to appease the gods: "From that time on the tribes of mortal men on earth/ have burned the white bones for the gods on smoky altars."<sup>18</sup> Zeus retaliates by hiding fire from men so that they have no way to cook the good portions of meat that they have received. Prometheus brings fire back to men, and Zeus, outraged, creates Pandora. He sends her to earth, and man, unable to resist the tempting gift, allows her and her descendants (women) to bring sorrow to earth. Prometheus, as punishment for his misdeeds, is chained to a rocky crag, his ever-regenerating liver to be devoured daily by a vulture.<sup>19</sup>

The mythology of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* derives from Hesiod's *Theogony*. Aeschylus's tragedy shows Prometheus in a more favorable light than does Hesiod's depiction, in which Prometheus is a pathetic trickster, foolish in his endeavor to deceive Zeus. Aeschylus's Prometheus is the benefactor of mankind, giving them fire

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<sup>18</sup> See *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), 25.

<sup>19</sup> This summary of the Hesiodic origin of sacrifice comes from Athanassakis's *Hesiod*, 23-26.

and teaching them arts after the gods have essentially left them for dead. In Aeschylus's work, we see Prometheus suffering, under the pains of harsh sunlight and morning frosts, the fate decreed him by Zeus. Prometheus, in describing the good he has attempted to do mankind, recounts how he tricked Zeus, giving man the best portions of meat for his food, and forcing Zeus to be satisfied with an unpalatable immolation: "It was I bound the thighbones wrapped in fat,/ and the long shank; it was I that set mortals on/ the murky road of prophecy."<sup>20</sup>

Poe was also likely to have known Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*, a tragedy in which Eteokles and Polyneices, the sons of Oedipus, slay each other in battle before a gate of the title city. Prior to the battle that results in the tragic ending, a scout informs Eteokles of

...seven men, violent, terrible, captains  
they slit the throat of a bull, catching the blood  
in an inverted shield, bound with black iron.  
They splashed their hands in bull blood, they swore  
by the trinity of battle, Ares, god of strife,  
Enyo, goddess of frenzy, and Phobos, god of fear,  
either to sack and gut this city,  
or by dying to smear and defile  
this life-giving land with their blood.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See *Prometheus Bound*, trans. David Grene, in *Greek Tragedies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), 83.

<sup>21</sup> *Aeschylus: Seven Against Thebes*, trans. Anthony Hecht and Helen H. Bacon, ed. William Arrowsmith (London: Oxford UP, 1973), 23.

Eteokles, prior to battle, gives a salutation to the gods, promising sacrifices to come:

But first, hear my sacred vow;  
then raise Apollo's chant, holy, propitious,  
a victory cry and halleluiah,  
the appropriate ceremonial of Hellas,  
as at our sacrificial rites,  
giving confidence to friends,  
letting loose fear to the enemy...  
I speak to the defending gods of the land  
who oversee the plowland and marketplace,  
to the springs of Dirke and the waters of Ismenos I speak;  
and this I make my vow:  
if things turn out well and the city survives,  
the sons of Kadmos shall make the altars of the gods  
run with blood and slaughter bulls upon them.  
I will erect trophies, and with enemy spoils, taken by spear,  
I will adorn the fronts of the temples, the gods' holy houses.<sup>22</sup>

In both cases we see the public slitting of a beast's throat and the spilling of his blood as an offer promised to the gods as reward for granting victory. The communication is circular, with men asking the gods for something and offering a public display of supposedly religious zeal in return.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

Porphyry, in *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, gives a human rather than godly source of the Greek *bouphonia*, or ox-killing ritual. Of old, claims Porphyry, rituals were pure and fruits of harvest were sacrificed; animal sacrifice was not allowed. But a farmer became angry and slew an ox when it disrupted a vegetable sacrifice. He felt guilty after he calmed down and so gave the ox a proper burial before exiling himself to Crete. When droughts plagued Athenians, they consulted the oracle at Delphi, and the oracle claimed that their situation might be relieved if the farmer were brought back from Crete and the Athenians instituted an elaborate sacrifice ritual in which the murderers were punished, the ox was put on its feet as if it were alive, and the meat of the ox was ravenously devoured. The whole city, at the farmer's insistence, participated in the ritual. Women acted as bringers of water. One man brought an axe, another stunned the animal, and another cut its throat. The meat was cut up and eaten, and then the hide of the beast was stuffed and stitched up before being hooked to a plow. A murder-trial followed, the water-bearers accusing the axe-sharpeners, the axe-sharpeners accusing the man who brought the axe, the man who brought the axe accusing the man who had cut the beast's throat, and the murderer ultimately blaming the knife. The ritual ended when the knife was thrown into the sea.<sup>23</sup> Porphyry views the ritual with great skepticism, claiming that it exists as a social construction, a way for man to justify his carnivorous practice, but the ornate quality of the ritual and the importance of its various aspects can be discerned here. The ritual must be public, involving more or less the entire community; the ritual must be elaborate and convoluted, so as to remove attention from the central act; blood

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<sup>23</sup> See *Abstinence from Animal Food*, in *Select Works of Porphyry*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: Thomas Rodd, 1823), II.28-31.

must be spilled, and the animal must be eaten; and there must be a complicated system for dissipating blame for the incident.<sup>24</sup> Nothing may be left out, or dire consequences may follow, since much is at stake when one attempts to communicate with the gods.

### III.

From the beginning of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” we are confronted with a Prometheus figure. The narrator describes his motive for murder:

I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell on me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever. (III, 792)

This is an inadequate explanation for the narrator’s crime; he does not think of it until the act of narration. Yet, remembering the myth that Prometheus had his liver devoured daily by a vulture, we can begin to see the narrator as a Prometheus figure. A vulture eye would be a natural choice for something disturbing to recount about a person’s appearance, so it may not seem necessarily to link the mythological Titan with our narrator. But the narrator is also a bringer of fire. He gives a great deal of attention to the eight nights during which he sticks his head barely into the old man’s room, each time attempting to throw an extremely thin ray of light onto the hated eye. Christopher Benfey

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<sup>24</sup> Renè Girard claims that sacrifice exists as a means of assuaging a cycle of violence within human communities. See *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977).

notes Richard Wilbur's tendency to read the tale allegorically, "with the speaker-killer representing the imaginative faculty of the mind and the old man representing the scientific, rational side."<sup>25</sup> Here again, Prometheus is implied: the narrator brings fire, symbolic of creativity, to man, waiting blindly in the dark. The narrator becomes angry at the sight of the eye, since it represents the vulture and the price that must be paid for the Promethean gift of flame.

We catch glimpses of the mythological basis for animal sacrifice, but the murder itself exemplifies the ancient ritual as well. Burkert notes the ancient Greeks' tendency to focus on the opening and closing rituals of the sacrifice, "as if trying to distract attention from the central point, which nonetheless remained permanently fixed."<sup>26</sup> To distract themselves from the terrible act central to the performance, the Greeks created highly formal and elaborate introductions and conclusions. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" certainly ritualizes his behavior prior to killing the old man; he brags about the coolness with which he was able to extend the lantern into the old man's room, his disturbingly formal segue to homicide. Yet mark the brevity of the description of the killing: "He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done" (III, 795). It is not even clear exactly how the narrator kills his victim.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher Benfey, "Poe and the Unreadable: 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 31-2.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> E. Arthur Robinson describes the murder: "Vision becomes insight, the 'Evil Eye' an evil 'I,' and the murdered man a victim sacrificed to a self-constituted deity." See "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *Critics on Poe*, ed. David B. Kesterson (Coral Gables: U of Miami P, 1973), 113.

Our killer then tries to convince us further that he is not mad by describing the steps he took in order to conceal his crime. Herein lies the most convincing evidence that Poe constructed this story with a failed ancient Greek animal sacrifice in mind:

First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings...There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all... (III, 796)

There are practical reasons for this series of actions in terms of plot. The narrator must try to hide what he has done before the authorities arrive. The boxing up of the heart allows for the climactic finale, the narrator's revelation of his deed. But the elements of sacrifice are clearly here. The narrator dismembers his victim's body and catches the blood in a basin, just as the ancient Greeks would catch a bull's blood in a tub before divvying up the portions of the animal to the gods and man, respectively.

Poe leaves out significant portions of the sacrificial proceeding in order to corrupt the ritual, altering its meaning. First and foremost, there is the quandary that the victim is a human and not an animal. This could be a statement on the baselessness of the crime; the unwitting participant in the sacrifice killed the wrong type of victim. And since sacrifices are meant to separate the sphere of humans from that of the animals, a confusion of modes here actually strengthens the point that humans are capable of crime for no other reason than the spirit of perverseness. If we read the story as symbolic, the change from animal to human is not particularly problematic anyway. There is no



burning of the bones, no feast on the good meat. Our murderer has done one thing correctly, he has salvaged the blood of his victim, but he cannot make it sacred by splattering the walls of the chamber with it. There is no primal shriek going up to commemorate the death blow—or is there? While it does make logical sense for the old man to “shriek once and once only” at the moment of attack—I imagine that most who have a vague awareness that they are being killed would shriek—the old man’s scream has its place in an unsuccessful blood ritual. In the formal tradition of the Greek sacrifice, the women participating in the ritual would send up the death cry.<sup>28</sup> When the old man lets go his yelp, he usurps the role of the sacrificer, subverting the purpose of the ritual. Poe is creating for us a world in which humans do not achieve meaningful sacrifice, thereby relegating themselves to the same moral rung as the beast.

Poe presents us with connections to ancient Greek sacrifices in “The Black Cat” as well. In this story the ritualized killing of an animal, the narrator’s perversion made manifest, occurs quite literally:

One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;--hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart;--hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence;--hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place

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<sup>28</sup> See Walter Burkert’s summary of ancient animal sacrifice in *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985), 56-57.

it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. (III, 852)

Here we have another narrator killing for a reason he does not understand. He has already mutilated the animal, and rather than kill it in some common way, he makes a production out of it, weeping and wailing, stringing the cat up as if it were a Black Hills outlaw. The Christian tone of the story should not be overlooked, as it is apparent in the above passage. Poe was writing in a time when America was almost uniformly Christian, and he needed to sell his work. We should not dismiss the relevancy of Greek religion on these grounds, however. The fear of separation from Zeus was a powerful motivation in committing animal sacrifice; with his heinous act, the narrator comes closer to reaching out to a god than he realizes. But we as readers can recognize the motif, and the narrator's lack of awareness makes the act completely wanton.

Although the narrator makes a ceremony out of killing the first cat, he provides us with no other evidence of this being a type of sacrifice. But I would again argue that it's what's missing that is important. Our cat-killer does not burn his animal's remains, and yet his misguided theory that the "*bas relief*" cat on the last remaining wall of his house was created by someone tossing the cat into the fire as a way of alarming him should strike us as strange (III, 853). On one hand, this is a microcosm of what the narrator hopes his readers will give him, a logical explanation for extraordinary events. His attempt at logic fails, but even the hint of burning the cat after a ritualized procession should continue to plant the motif of animal sacrifice in our minds.

The narrator notes that alcohol “grew upon [him]” like a “disease” (III, 851). We know his affinity is for wine and that his persistence in drinking to excess is blamed for extreme changes in his formerly amicable mien. This gluttonous consumption of alcohol is another failure on the part of the narrator to complete the requirements for sacrifice. When he downs every last drop of his wine, he makes no libation to the gods. Not only does he not dispose of the animal properly, he also neglects to consecrate his sacrifice by consuming the wine that he should pour out. Pluto, both the narrator’s cat and the god of the underworld, will drink up no alms so long as our culprit remains alive. The murderer’s drinking helps lead to his crime on the literal level, and at the symbolic level, it further removes the misdeed from the redemptive potential of the blood ritual.

We should not overlook the most absurd thing that the narrator does: killing his wife for nothing more than trying to stop him from killing the second cat. If this were a proper Greek sacrifice, the wife’s place as a woman would be to raise the death shriek at the animal’s moment of doom. Instead, she tries to prevent the deed and receives the blow that had hitherto been intended for the cat. Remembering the myth of Pandora, we can connect this slaying directly to the animal sacrifice ritual. Zeus sends Pandora to Earth in order to avenge his duping at the hands of Prometheus, who gives fire to man. Zeus had previously denied man access to fire because Prometheus fooled him into accepting the worst part of sacrificial animals. When the narrator kills his wife rather than the cat, he symbolically destroys Pandora, the unleasher of all man’s earthly woes. When she thwarts his attempt to kill the pet she is doubly damned, both Zeus’s weapon of

choice in bringing misery to mankind and the ruin of man's attempt to reconcile himself with the gods through immolation.

The narrator's attempt to hide the body is telling in terms of the blood ritual: "Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar" (III, 856). His wife has now become an object of sacrifice; he projects onto her the dismemberment and burning associated with the ancients. He even talks about her in a detached tone, referring to someone whom he presumably used to love as "the corpse" and "it" as if she were the animal he had intended to destroy all along.<sup>29</sup> Renè Girard might call the cat a "surrogate victim" whose availability for abuse might have been the only thing keeping the narrator's wife alive to begin with.<sup>30</sup> James W. Gargano notes that the narrator's murder of his wife is the re-committing of the same crime he perpetrates against the cat, with the second killing being a form that will enrage society.<sup>31</sup>

Considering the story as a corrupted sacrifice ritual, part of what makes the narrator's crime so evil is that he attempts to hide it away from his community. The same can be said for the killer in "The Tell-Tale Heart." Sacrifice rituals were meant to foster a sense of communion between man and fellow man, to rejoin man and the god whose favor he had lost, and to separate man from the animal world. The narrator here fails on all counts. And when it comes to the spirit of perversity, the sacrificial image strand

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Hoffman notes the equation between "wife" and "cat" that becomes more and more observable over the course of "The Black Cat." See *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 231.

<sup>30</sup> See Girard, especially pp. 79-82.

<sup>31</sup> James W. Gargano, "'The Black Cat': Perverseness Reconsidered," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales*, ed. William L. Howarth (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), 92.

should help us indict the narrator as someone with no more ability to control his base urges than has the common pet or the wild beast.

“The Cask of Amontillado,” of all Poe’s tales, provides the most striking parallels to ancient Greek sacrifice. We are dealing with a more intelligent, conniving narrator in “Cask” than we were faced with in the previously mentioned stories. Montresor plots Fortunato’s death at great length, and he is wiser than our other narrators in terms of avoiding detection. On the surface, he has committed the perfect crime. Montresor does not read his own act as one of perversity. He describes his motive quite clearly when he mentions “the thousand injuries of Fortunato.” But Poe’s reading, I think, considers Montresor’s act to be unjustifiable, likely even animalistic. Poe again returns to the failed sacrifice motif in order to get this point across.

Montresor’s own language may be the best clue that we should be reading “Cask” under the pretenses of sacrifice: he claims that he smiled “at the thought of [Fortunato’s] immolation” (III, 1257). Montresor obviously considers the act to be sacrificial; whether or not he feels that he succeeded in this “immolation” is debatable. But Poe must surely call him a failure. Burkert’s description of the ancient blood ritual is pertinent here: “[A] threefold rhythm becomes evident in the course of the sacrifice, moving from an inhibited, labyrinthine beginning, through a terrifying midpoint, to a scrupulously tidy conclusion.”<sup>32</sup> Note how well “Cask” fits this form, from the characters traversing the depths of the Montresor catacombs, to Fortunato’s realization that he’s come to the end of his line, to the neatness of Montresor sealing up the last brick

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), 12.

and making his getaway, only to recount the story fifty years later. Upon further examination, we will be able to call this tale a near-perfect inversion of the blood ritual trope, moving from festival to sacrifice rather than from killing to festival.

Part of the motivation for ancient sacrifices was the encouragement of community togetherness. Once the sacrifice itself was over, a great feast was made with the animal's body. "Cask" begins with a celebration, "the supreme madness of the carnival season," which we know Fortunato partakes in to excess (III, 1257). It is unclear whether Montresor attends the carnival or not, though the evidence suggests that he does not; rather, he seems to be lingering around the outskirts of the revelry, waiting on Fortunato to leave the festivities.

Montresor leads Fortunato back to his palazzo and down into his family's burial vault. Montresor even describes Fortunato in a way reminiscent of a bull being led to slaughter in the ancient Greek procession. Sacrificial bulls had their horns gilded and were dressed up with ribbons. It was necessary that the bull be compliant with the sacrifice, as if giving agreement with the holy rites that were about to take place: hence, the sprinkling of water over the bull to get him to nod his head.<sup>33</sup> Fortunato wears "a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head [is] surmounted by the conical cap and bells" (III, 1257). Fortunato is dressed in a bizarre celebratory costume, wearing the familiar fool's cap, with bells in place of gilded horns. Rather than anointing Fortunato's head with water to attain his agreement, Montresor continues to get his adversary drunker. The horrific deed unfolds, up until the very end, under the complete insistence of Fortunato. Montresor is careful to arrange it as such. It makes his revenge all the

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<sup>33</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 56.

sweeter to think of Fortunato realizing how many opportunities Montresor gave him to turn back, to leave the catacombs. Fortunato's pride, in combination with his extreme inebriation, keeps him from leaving the subterranean setting. Montresor entreats Fortunato to withdraw on account of his health, saying he can show the Amontillado to Luchesi. But Fortunato is too far gone, too arrogant to allow his "virtuoso spirit" to go unnoticed. So he continues, like a bull to the slaughter.

Again, drinking brings to mind the idea of libation. Fortunato and Montresor each drink on the way down into the catacombs, at one point proposing toasts that serve as one of the many dark puns of the story. Fortunato salutes the members of the Montresor family buried around them, and Montresor drinks to Fortunato's long life. We should continue to keep in mind that Poe uses the scaffolding of animal sacrifice to build his story, not filling it in completely in order to stress to his readership that the ritual is performed incorrectly. When Fortunato drinks to excess, he offers no libation to the gods, and neither does Montresor spill a drop that we see. The allegorical ritual continues unconsecrated.

Poe further inverts the typical sacrifice by having Fortunato take the lead from Montresor. Just prior to revealing the sacrificial weapon, the ancient Greek sacrificer would throw his hands to the sky, reciting "prayer, invocation, wish, and vow."<sup>34</sup> Consider Poe's pun on the word "mason," beginning with Fortunato's wild "gesticulation," supposedly a sign of the "brotherhood," and ending with Montresor showing Fortunato the trowel he has apparently been concealing all night (III, 1260). Fortunato subverts the implied sacrifice ritual by taking on the role of the sacrificer,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 56.

throwing the bottle upwards in a gesture both wild and eerily religious. Fortunato invokes, and Montresor shows him the tool that will eventually be used in his murder. It will, however, be a bloodless killing, devoid of the most important element of the ancient Greek ritual. Near the end of their journey into the catacombs, just before Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall, we find Montresor “follow[ing] immediately at [Fortunato’s] heels” (III, 1261).<sup>35</sup> Though Montresor will prevail in his assassination, Fortunato begins to give the impression that he’s the one leading his assailant to the altar. And the site of the homicide, the wall that Montresor will re-cover with bones, does indeed look like a sacrificial altar. The sacrificial scream, typically raised by the group doing the sacrificing, issues from the lungs of Fortunato. It frightens Montresor to the point that he grabs his rapier, at which time he could successfully complete the sacrifice by drawing Fortunato’s blood (III, 1262). He instead chooses to finish the wall.

Just as Montresor is about to seal Fortunato’s fate, we see yet another Prometheus figure. Poe continues to ground his references to the ancient Greeks both in historical ritual and mythology. After stating that he called out to Fortunato with no response, Montresor claims, “I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within” (III, 1263). There is the potential for various readings here. For Montresor, fire is a futile symbolic attempt at giving Fortunato the knowledge that this is an act of vengeance, that Fortunato committed some series of wrongs against Montresor and this is the retribution. If we consider that the murderer views this as a sacrifice, throwing the torch into the chamber may be his last-ditch effort at involving fire, an element so

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<sup>35</sup> For more on the reversal of Montresor’s and Fortunato’s roles, see Thomas Pribek, “The Serpent and the Heel,” *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism: History, Theory, Interpretation* 20, no. 1 (1987): 22-3.



necessary in the ancient Greek procedure. If Montresor is Prometheus, the bringer of fire, then Fortunato must be man. The cell in which he will suffocate corresponds to the terrible world that man must inhabit as a result of the vengeance that Zeus will take upon him in the form of Pandora. The story even has its Pandora, the Lady Fortunato, the source of mankind's ailments and perhaps the cause for Montresor's ill will towards Fortunato. Or perhaps Montresor is Zeus binding Fortunato, a hapless Prometheus, to the wall as punishment for his misdeeds. Any of these readings could be valid, but it is not really important which one we choose. Suffice it to say that there is a bringing of fire, there is retribution for wrongdoing in the form of being chained up indefinitely, and there is the brief reference to a woman who could be the source of our narrator's ire.

We should again return to the question of why Poe would choose to arrange his stories around ancient Greek sacrifice. What does it mean to "The Cask of Amontillado" that Poe built it this way? Read the story backwards and the sacrifice ritual proceeds roughly in order. We get Prometheus and fire and Pandora, then the sacrificial killing, then the leading of the animal to the slaughter, then the communal festival. Poe sets the story up as a reversed, corrupt Greek sacrifice to show the fallibility of his narrator and the lawless nature of man. Montresor does something the other narrators do not by attempting to justify his evil ways. Calling the homicide an "immolation" is supposed to lead us to the conclusion that Montresor feels validated in doing what he did. Montresor tries to talk both himself and us into believing that he thinks his actions were acceptable. Montresor wants us to see this as an accomplished sacrifice; Poe wants us to believe that it was not. The sacrifice happens in reverse order. There are no libations offered. There

is a meek attempt at burning “the animal” with the flambeaux, but there is no real incineration of the victim. No smoke reaches the gods as a sign of good faith between man and those high on Olympus. The ancient Greek sacrifice, which served to separate man from the beasts, which insured that the gods would preserve the hierarchy god-man-animal, has failed yet another narrator. Montresor coldly gives us his rationale for murder, but it breaks down under the weight of the corrupted sacrifice. His act, too, is a perverse one, cruel in a way that can only be human, yet animalistic as killing an old man in bed or burying an axe in the brain of one’s wife.<sup>36</sup>

Louise Zaidman and Pauline Pantel provide a helpful summary of how animal sacrifice served the ancient Greeks as the line of demarcation between humans and beasts:

[‘the bloody animal sacrifice of the alimentary type’] simultaneously gave expression to the bonds that tied the citizens one to another and served as a privileged means of communication with the divine world. In return the gods authorized and guaranteed the functioning of the human community, maintaining it in its proper station between and at a due distance from themselves and the animal kingdom respectively.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> It would seem that if Poe were going to use the sacrifice ritual to comment on perverseness and the animal nature of man in his tales of murder, the most obvious candidate for such a trope (based on title alone) would be “The Imp of the Perverse.” Yet the blood ritual is not apparent here. The assailant does kill by using a poisoned candle flame, but there is no more surmounting evidence to label anyone as the Prometheus of the tale (III, 1224). The tale is mostly a diatribe about perversity on the part of the narrator, and perhaps served Poe as a place where he could work out some of the thoughts that occurred to him when writing “Instinct vs Reason—A Black Cat.” Poe does not condemn the narrator of “Imp” nearly so much as he does the narrators of the three stories this essay considers. He appears to use this story as a way of organizing his thoughts on that demon, perversity, rather than damning man for not having much more mental capability for restraint than a common animal.

<sup>37</sup> Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 29-30.

Since the purpose of ancient blood rituals was to separate man from beast, and to join man with god, an allusion to a failed sacrifice is a way for Poe to dissolve this blurry line.

Poe's philosophies on animal instinct and its relationship to human thought are easily observable in his sketch "Instinct vs Reason—A Black Cat" (1840). Here, Poe postulates the theory that the behavior of animals is a product "of the Deity itself, acting *directly*, and through no corporal organ, upon the volition of the animal" (II, 478). In this short, essayistic piece, Poe describes his black cat, which has learned to use a thumb-latch to open a kitchen door. The first sentence of "Instinct vs Reason" gives us a theory that I claim motivates several of Poe's short stories: "the line which demarcates the instinct of the brute creation from the boasted reason of man, is, beyond doubt, of the most shadowy and unsatisfactory character—a boundary line far more difficult to settle than even the North-Eastern or the Oregon" (II, 477-8).

Given Poe's conjecture in "Instinct vs Reason" that intelligence in animals can only be described by a deity acting on the animal, "and through no corporal organ," our speculations about ancient Greek sacrifice throughout Poe's tales can be cast in a sinister light. All the characters we have considered either wittingly or unwittingly fail to consecrate a blood ritual; none of them can carry out his deed so that it could be viewed as holy on the allegorical level. In doing so, they fail to establish a relationship with the gods that separate them from the animals. If all these narrators are beastlike, succumbing to urges that they cannot describe and which they may or may not call perverse, then the impetus for their unexplainable actions must be a god acting on them. Perhaps Poe is making a statement about the exceedingly poor quality of life that man must live. We

exist in a world presided over not by a benevolent being, but instead by a god much like Zeus—a god who would drive us to acts of insanity and begrudge us the things that make us happiest. This god refuses to distinguish between us and the beasts. Poe’s narrators are helpless to reach him.

My own attempt at explaining these stories begins to sound extremely bleak. It certainly is. Joseph Stark argues that “The Black Cat” has a lack of explanation at its center. The spirit of perversity leads to the narrator’s downfall, yet there is no accounting for the origin of that spirit. In analyzing the narrator’s desire for someone to figure out where he went wrong, Stark may unwittingly reveal the kernel that Poe wants us to take from the story:

Indeed, this statement itself plays most directly into the conclusion toward which Poe baits his readers: all things can be explained by simple cause and effect. If such a conclusion is true, then all human actions have an irrational determinism at their core, indistinct from the behavior of the Ourang-Outang in “The Rue Morgue.”<sup>38</sup>

Rather than conclude, as Stark eventually does, that it would be too frightening a prospect for Poe’s tales of murder to be based around such “irrational determinism,” we should take the opportunity to speculate on whether, in Poe’s world, anything actually *does* separate “Ourang-Outangs” from humans. My speculation here leads us to a discussion of what failed sacrifice says about the common discourses of Poe and the sentimentalists, these being their respective treatments of temperance and abolitionism.

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Stark, “Motive and Meaning: The Mystery of the Will in Poe’s ‘The Black Cat,’” *Mississippi Quarterly* 57 (2004): 261-2.

#### IV.

Philip Fisher in his book *Hard Facts* (1985) claims that sentimental works attempt to extend humanity to those who have traditionally occupied the role of prisoner, whether this means children, animals, convicts, or slaves.<sup>39</sup> “Compassion,” according to Fisher, “is, of course, the primary emotional goal of sentimental narration. Compassion exists in relation to suffering and makes of suffering the primary subject matter, perhaps the exclusive subject matter, of sentimental narrative.”<sup>40</sup> Works like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* make a claim upon readers’ sympathies for a group of people that had previously been considered sub-human. To this end, Stowe creates a rhetorical situation in which her slave characters are united with their white, middle-to-upper-class readership through analogous experiences of suffering.<sup>41</sup>

Jane Tompkins believes scenes like the one depicting little Eva’s death in Stowe’s novel derive their popularity from their “relationship...to a pervasive cultural myth which invests the suffering and death of an innocent victim with just the kind of power that critics deny Stowe’s novel: the power to work in, and change, the world.”<sup>42</sup> For Tompkins,

little Eva’s death enacts the drama of which all the major episodes of the novel are transformations, the idea, central to Christian soteriology, that the highest human calling is to give one’s life for another. It presents one version of the ethic of sacrifice on which the entire novel is based and

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 96, 99-100.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, especially pp. 118-9.

<sup>42</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 130.

contains in some form all of the motifs that, by their frequent recurrence, constitute the novel's ideological framework.<sup>43</sup>

Like Fisher, Tompkins sees *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as attempting to do significant cultural work. She implies that Eva's death is sacrificial in the Christian sense. Stowe sends the child into the world of her novel so that she may suffer for the sin of slavery.<sup>44</sup> Fisher claims that Stowe achieves her goals of extending humanity to and fostering compassion for slaves by placing a child between the reader and the slave: "by doing this she is able to borrow from the nearly completed historical sentimentalization of the child, the energy to begin the more difficult and historically risky sentimentalization of the slave."<sup>45</sup>

Again, Eva is the Christ-like go-between, sacrificed so that the cause of abolition may be communicated to the reader, potentially redeeming the white characters in the novel and the white readers of the novel in one swoop. Eva is a metonym for Stowe's book; she is sent into the world in order to educate people about the immorality of slavery.<sup>46</sup>

In Poe's work, there is the opposite trend. The sacrifices are not modeled after Christ, but instead after the ancient Greeks. They are not successful sacrifices. They are

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>44</sup> Fisher claims that Eva "dies from hearing and seeing the slavery around her." See p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>46</sup> The sacrifice of a woman to sentimental ends is not unique to Stowe's novel. Consider also Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9), in which Beth, the lone innocent of the March children, is constantly at death's door. She nearly dies after being forced by her irresponsible sisters to bear essentially the entire weight of caring for the Hummels' sick infant. Beth survives this scare, her near-death experience offering moral instruction that allows the other March girls to make claims like "If God spares Beth, I never will complain again," and "If God spares Beth, I'll try to love and serve Him all my life" (174). Beth finally does die, not from any tangible cause, but because she cannot proceed past the stage of innocence. She fades away at nineteen because she is unable to follow her sisters into the world of adult knowledge. In Chapter 36, we become certain that Beth is to die because Alcott takes care to describe her as holiness incarnate: her skin has "a strange, transparent look about it, as if the mortal was being slowly refined away, and the immortal shining through the frail flesh with an indescribably pathetic beauty" (340). Jo considers Beth's strange condition to be a "cross" to bear (342). Beth fades from the profane world in order to become sacred. In a novel in which the characters are required to give of themselves, Beth gives all she has. References are to Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: New American Library, 2004).

not gifts to the world at large, sent by a benevolent God for the purpose of redemption. Neither are Poe's stories primarily an attempt to educate his audience about some social cause, although Poe's use of this sacrifice theme does accomplish this at times. Rather than use the Christian trope deployed by writers like Stowe for the purpose of compassion with fellow humans, Poe uses the Greek sacrificial structure to show us just how frightening it can be to be a human coexisting with other humans. Poe takes advantage of the prevalence of a few prominent discourses by introducing Greek sacrifice into his works. The popularity of the Christian idea of sacrifice allows Poe to play ironically on the antithetical theological foundations for these respective religions. For the ancient Greeks, sacrifice was something that they justified as a way of communicating with gods that they certainly did not view as kind, but rather dangerous. If the Greeks were lucky, the gods would not frown upon them, at least. For modern Christians, sacrifice is something that God did for them, giving his son as both means and messenger of the proper path to redemption. Poe taps into a powerful cultural metaphor, but he does it in such a way as to cause the reader to wonder just what sort of narrator he deals with and just what kind of world he inhabits. Additionally, because of the importance of classicism to the early American mentality, especially among those fortunate enough to have received a liberal education, Poe could have been sure of an audience with an understanding of this theme.

I believe Poe engages in a type of dark sentimentalism, by which I mean that his works are tangentially related to causes that Stowe and others take up, but he approaches them in a way that has a far less positive outlook on the state of and potential of

humankind. For example, Stowe's work employs the Christian idea of sacrifice with the implied belief that doing so can humanize slaves enough to convince readers that slaves are worthy of sympathy. Whether he intended them to or not, Poe's tales achieve a similar end, but through a different process. Rather than bring a slave to the level of all men, Poe brings all men to the level of slave: slaves to impulses they do not understand, foolish for thinking that reason is a faculty possessed and used by men. A veiled abolitionist discourse emerges from Poe's creation of his unsuccessful sacrifices, and this discourse is not humanist in the way we may think of Stowe's. A possible deduction from Poe's work is that whites should no longer be able to use their old standby of classing blacks as a group that deserved to be slaves because of some inferior power of reasoning. He destabilizes the enlightenment idea that reason is a faculty available to humans.

David Reynolds astutely classifies Poe as a writer affected by the temperance movement.<sup>47</sup> The notion that these stories are failed sacrifices, with the roots of their failure often being linked to abuse of alcohol and neglect of libation, contributes to the thesis advanced by Reynolds. As with the slavery discourse that we may observe in Poe's stories, the influence of the temperance movement on his writing manifests itself in a way different from that which we see in sentimental works. In works like Stowe's, the case for temperance is usually made through an attempt to garner sympathy for women who suffer at the hands of intemperate men. In Poe's works, drunkenness functions somewhat differently. "Cask" seems to say that if one gets drunk, he risks being duped

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<sup>47</sup> David S. Reynolds, "Poe's Art of Transformation: 'The Cask of Amontillado' in its Cultural Context," in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: U of Cambridge P, 1993), 96-8. Reynolds puts "The Cask of Amontillado" in the category of dark temperance literature.



by a diabolical character like Montresor. “The Black Cat” provides a frightening view into the mind of its narrator, but his wife is not developed as a character. She is the target of the actions of a diseased mind, and the symbolic implication of the narrator’s alcoholism is that he is prone to acting on impulse. The symbolic purpose that alcohol serves in this work is more important than the one ascribed to it by the narrator, who wishes to use it, along with perversity, as the excuse for his actions. Rather than being an out-and-out condemnation of alcohol abuse, the imbibing of the characters in these stories, when viewed through the lens of sacrifice, seems to invoke the irrational behavior that humankind at-large displays, alcohol-fueled or not. Poe’s work is infused with the discourse of temperance, but it uses this discourse to take aim at the notion of reason, that resource that humans pride as making them superior to the animal world.

#### V.

Sacrifice as it appears in these stories is related to a theme that is more apparent in other works in Poe’s corpus: the concern with audience response and an authorial wish for possession over the meaning of his text, for not getting caught up in what one’s works mean to a reader. Stories like “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) and the Dupin series of detective tales show an almost obsessive concern with the idea of an unreadable book, or with a character whose inner workings are utterly unknowable from his outward appearance. In *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Ann Douglas, juxtaposing Poe’s work with Melville’s, notes this phenomenon:

Melville defined the test which every formidable American author in his day and since has had to impose on himself: how to exploit and resist the

crude American material which both enriches and impoverishes the writer; how to take the exact measure of the reader who belongs to and is that material, how to know him utterly and intimately without being absorbed by him. Before Melville started to write, Edgar Allan Poe had dramatized the dilemma in his detective tales. Poe's detective figure, Auguste Dupin, explains on one occasion that in trying to solve any case, he must put himself precisely in the place of the criminal involved: trace his footsteps, think his thoughts. Little wonder that Dupin, impoverished, obsessive, secretive, resembles the insane and criminal narrators of Poe's horror tales; the only difference between Poe's detective and his criminal is that while both imagine the crime, the detective does not commit it.<sup>48</sup>

Douglas implies, and I agree, that Dupin is a symbol for the author figure. His relationship to the other characters around him, whether it be the criminals he helps catch or the Minister he consistently outwits, is analogous to what Poe and Melville wished to do as writers: to be able to give meaning to the world before them on their own terms without losing their identity to their readers.

I don't think it's unreasonable to contend that something similar is going on in the tales of horror that I have discussed in this thesis. As long as we are discussing the characters in these stories as symbolizing this or that Greek god, or some participant in an ancient sacrifice ritual, I believe we can speculate that these characters, especially the narrators, may be stand-ins for the author. Whether Montresor and the narrators from "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" are Prometheus figures, or unsuccessful

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<sup>48</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 293.

sacrificers failing to separate their kind from the animals, we must say that they are all attempting to communicate. They all want to make themselves known to us in the way they wish to be seen, and each fails. It is easy for us to realize that a madman wishes to speak with us, that we are dealing with someone it may be difficult for us to understand; this, though, is symbolic of the relationship between an author who wishes to sell his work to make a living while still maintaining his sense that his stories mean what he wants them to. The failed sacrifice, the broken circle of communication between man and gods, is a profound symbol of this desire.

I would like to close with a brief discussion of one of Poe's lesser-known tales, "Shadow.—A Parable" (1835) because I think it shows that the author considered some of these ideas about what it means to write and communicate. In the first paragraph, the narrator muses on the written form:

Ye who read are still among the living; but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows. For indeed strange things shall happen, and secret things be known, and many centuries shall pass away, ere these memorials be seen of men. And, when seen, there will be some to disbelieve, and some to doubt, and yet a few who will find much to ponder upon in the characters here graven with a stylus of iron. (II, 189)

As with so many of Poe's tales, the teller places the reader in an odd narrative space. We are given information seemingly indecipherable outside of its context, which we do not have. If the narrator is correct, and a prophet, he is dead and we have recovered his

writings after some bizarre, potentially cataclysmic, period of time. The narrator rates his story as one of great importance, as one worthy of his telling, regardless of its reception.

Poe's sketch outlines a ritual of the narrator's community, performed for undisclosed reasons, though we may speculate about them. Seven men, including the narrator, gather in an enclosed, elaborately decorated room, drinking wine and making merry against an otherwise somber setting. The narrator informs us that "the year had been a year of terror" and that "many prodigies and signs had taken place, and far and wide, over sea and land, the black wings of the Pestilence were spread abroad" (II, 189). We are later informed, quite casually, that a dead body lies within the room. The ritualistic drinking and celebrating of the narrator and his companions seems, then, to be a version of a wake, or perhaps a vague display of religiousness in a time when disaster has befallen their community; it may simply be a form of escapism. A frightening presence, Shadow, an apparent incarnation of Death, manifests itself on a brass door in the room. The narrator ends the story by describing the shadow's voice, and the reaction to it:

And then did we, the seven, start from our seats in horror, and stand trembling, and shuddering, and aghast: for the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, and, varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable, fell duskily upon our ears in the well remembered and familiar accents of many thousand departed friends. (II, 191)

In such an ambiguous story, we are again led to speculate about why Shadow has arrived. It could be there to carry off the spirit of the dead; it could be there to claim the lives of those still living, as they may be the few survivors of a plague year. We know that these men have lost thousands of friends, which would seem to point to their being the remnants of what was once a much larger community.

There is an allegorical meaning to the story, though, and it has to do with writing—more specifically, the narrative act. Our narrator’s sense of what it means to write, of the possibilities contained within writing, shares much with Roland Barthes’ theory in “The Death of the Author.” Barthes claims, “[a]s soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, [a] disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.”<sup>49</sup> An author enters into an act of death as soon as he takes up the mantle of writing. The same can be said for a narrator who enters into the act of telling, especially if the telling purports to be writing, as it does in this particular tale. The “memorials” that may be witnessed after “centuries” are symbolic of the gap between authors and readers, especially in light of the writer’s self-effacing practice of writing. Once the story is no longer his, a process that starts as soon as he engraves the letters with his “stylus of iron,” both persona and author cease to exist for anyone who brings another perspective to the text. The acts of writing and telling are shown to be sacrificial. It is a sacrifice for the author and the narrative persona to enter into the telling of a story

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<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. S. Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 142.

which is understood to prevent the presence of the person who did the writing/telling from surfacing in the meaning derived by a reader.

We can follow this symbolic trend throughout the story. The shadow's voice is comprised of the multitudinous voices of the dead. They are the voices of innumerable friends who have passed into immortality, whether at Elysium or elsewhere. Poe encodes both wish-fulfillment and lament into this symbol of the shadow. Within the logical structure set up by the narrator at the beginning of the story, readership is immortal and authorship and narration are subject to death. Death, paradoxically, is the prerequisite for their existence. So when the narrator hears the voices of the immortals, he hears a cacophony of readers. When he sees the shadow of death, he knows that it is a shadow he must enter, both spiritually and in terms of narrative. This is both horrifying and lamentable. Implicit, however, is a fantasy of wish-fulfillment, the fantastic desire for the appropriation of the text on the part of the author-teller. Because of his status as a professional man of letters, Edgar Allan Poe could not afford to be so cryptic as to make his stories virtually indecipherable. I do think, though, that this kernel of a wish to be unreadable is present in his works, and that it is this theme that later writers like Melville will build on in extremely obtuse works.