



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
INST FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

ENGLISH

# “I smiled – for *what* had I to fear?”

A Study of Edgar Allan Poe’s Sublime.

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Spring Term 2015

BA thesis, 15 higher education points

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**Title:** *“I smiled – for what had I to fear?” A Study of Edgar Allan Poe’s Sublime.*

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the aesthetics of the sublime in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories in order to clarify how Poe’s sublime is moving away from the Romantic conception of the sublime. Through Poe’s imaginative writing – his way of presenting impressive, yet disturbing, portraits of the human experience of horror – his work deals not only with aspects of the sublime but is also largely influenced by elements of the uncanny. In order to make the sublime experience possible it seems that Poe, through his usage of the uncanny, illustrates an environment that allows for his sublime to be experienced. However, while the uncanny seems to drive Poe’s narrative over the edge, it is the perversity of the narrators that allows for the sublime experience. This takes the subjective sublime of Romantic author’s such as Wordsworth and Kant even further, as the sublime experience is dependent upon certain traits of an individual.

**Keywords:** Gothic fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, literary studies, sublime, uncanny.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION.

*'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of  
powerful feelings: it takes its origin from  
emotion recollected in tranquillity.'*

(William Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1909–14)

Dealing with guilt, obsessions and deterioration of the human body and mind, Edgar Allan Poe deserves to be recognized as one of the most original and imaginative authors of his time. One of the many things which are remarkable about Poe is how he, through his imaginative usage of the sublime, instantly upsets any generalisation one might make about American Gothic. As H.P. Lovecraft (1973:53) put it, Poe changes Gothic literature by switching its emphasis from the depiction of gothic creatures and landscapes to the effects they have on the mind.

Poe's contributions to Gothic literature are many and varied. For example, the story of the split personality which was to produce Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is prefigured in "William Wilson," (1839) and the development of the detective thriller has two of its most important manifestations in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and "The Gold Bug." (1843) However, Poe's greatest contribution was not in terms of themes, but in terms of structure and tone: he was symbolist of terror, in which he has never been surpassed. (Punter, 1996:176-7)

The theme of madness and the aesthetics of the sublime are both continuous aspects of Edgar Allan Poe's work. Poe's sublime, however, seems to land between two eras – the Romantic and early modernist sublime. Through a critical close reading of short stories, such as *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, *Ligeia*, *The Black Cat*, among others, that highlight the usage of the sublime in relation to madness this essay aims to clarify how Poe's writing is moving away from the Romantic conception of the sublime.

## **1.1 Gothic Fiction.**

Gothic literature is generally believed to have begun with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole. This novel was published in the eighteenth century, after the philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment had attempted to bring reason to the world, and to banish superstition. As Kilgour (2006:3) explains, the emergence of the Gothic can be read as “the need for the sacred and transcendent in a modern enlightened secular world ... as the rebellion of the imagination against the tyranny of reason, in order to recover a suppressed imaginative freedom.” It came to be a “literature of nightmare” and within it we find dream landscapes and figures of the subconscious imagination. (MacAndrew, 1979:3)

Among the most powerful images conjured by the word ‘Gothic’ is that of a shadowy form rising from a mysterious place: Frankenstein’s monster rising from the laboratory table, Dracula creeping from his coffin, or, more generally, the slow opening of a crypt to reveal a dark or obscure figure. (Kilgour, 2006:3) In fact, when thinking of the word Gothic a lot of different meanings come to mind and the similar themes of repression of forbidden desires present in gothic literature are clearly focal points of most gothic critics. In this, the fact that the theme of madness revolves around Gothic literature also becomes apparent. (2006:8) The repressed emotions, which are personified in the Gothic novel, are horrible not only because of what they are: the fears and desires they call forth, but also because of how they enslave a person.

## **1.2 The Gothic Style of Edgar Allan Poe.**

Edgar Allan Poe is frequently categorised as part of early American Gothic and, along with other writers such as Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne,

considered one of the main authors of this period. Through imaginative means these writers present impressive, yet disturbing, portraits of the human experience of horror; often dealing with landscapes of the mind, psychological afflictions, guilt and obsessions. (Punter, 1996:165) Poe had a scientific way of thinking and writing; an understanding for the mechanics of fear and strangeness and could make common visions into nightmares. The importance of Poe manifests itself in his great influence. For many, mainly American, horror writers his work is greatly cherished and to him we owe the modern horror-story in its final and perfect state. (Lovecraft, 1973:53)

### **1.3 From the Romantic Sublime to the Modern Sublime.**

The sublime is an aesthetic concept of ancient lineage. In the eighteenth century, however, it underwent a major revival (Crowther, 1989:7) and later received important reformulations in the works of Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth, Immanuel Kant, and Sigmund Freud, among others. In this section I shall briefly outline the aspects of their theories.

#### *1.3.1 The Burkean Sublime.*

In his study *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke describes the sublime as being “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke, *Of the Sublime*, 1909-14). It causes astonishment because it is found to have an unimagined eloquence, greatness, significance or power. In order to understand the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful, we must examine the experience of pain and pleasure, whereof pain may be a more powerful emotion than pleasure and may have a stronger influence on our imagination. He separates the sublime and beautiful:

while sublime objects may be vast and overwhelming, or tragic and gloomy, the beautiful may be gentle and calm, joyful and bright. Thus, the sublime and beautiful may be used in varying ways for different effects in literature. (Burke, 1909–14)

### *1.3.2 The Romantic and Kantian Sublime.*

Each of the Romantics had different interpretations of the sublime. In Wordsworth's hands, the sublime become more intensely subjective than ever before, leading many to use the term "egoistical sublime" when speaking about his poetry. According to Monk, (1960:155) the individual becomes of primary importance by the time the sublime meets the Romantic: the sublime "becoming rather an individualistic interpretation of what the artist perceives."

Wordsworth was mostly interested in his own personal experience of nature. However, although his sublime was of subjective character, nature, for him, partakes of the Burkean sublime and beautiful and through the emotions of fear and love the sublime seemed to have built up his moral being. "I grew up," he says, "Foster'd alike by beauty and fear." (The Prelude, 305-6) The gentler aspects represent the beauty and the love of Burke; the grander aspects are sublime and evoke fear. (Monk, 1960:228-32)

Throughout the eighteenth-century the theory of the sublime came to rely more and more on the subjective response to sublimity, culminating in the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's explanation of the sublime as purely subjective. As he explained, "we must seek a ground external to ourselves for the beautiful of nature, but seek it for the sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought, which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature." (Kant, 1952:84) This proves that the most important element of the sublime as far as Romanticism and Kant are

concerned is the emphasis on the effect the sublime object has on the observer.

Kant, however, indicates that we must have a disposition for the sublime and the beautiful, and goes on to suggest that our disposition towards the sublime occurs in three characteristic ways:

Its feeling is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy, but in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan. The first I shall call the *terrifying sublime*, the second the *noble*, and the third the *splendid*.

(Kant, *Observations*, 47-8)

Here, Kant highlight both the continuities and discontinuities between the judgements upon the sublime and those upon the beautiful. On the other hand, Burke seemed more reticent regarding the possibilities of such combination. (Crowther, 1989:10)

### *1.3.3 Post Romantic and Freud's Modern Sublime.*

After the Romantic era, literature came to touch upon new aspects of the subjective experience of the sublime, such as the "tragic consciousness": the realization of the unavoidable suffering destined for all men and oppositions in life that can never be resolved. (Emery, 1973:356) The result of this is a sense of the uncanny, which will play a major role in modernist aspects of the sublime.

When defining the modern sublime, Freud's essay "Das Unheimliche" (The Uncanny) points to the uncanny and defines it as that "species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar." (Freud, 2003:124) For Freud (2003:135-45), the quintessential uncanny text is Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1818). This is because the story evokes castration-anxiety and animistic omnipotence, but these are related only in that they are both repressed. The thing that was "once well known" can take form of repressed beliefs, desires or fears which are brought up from



the unconscious to the conscious mind. We see that the experience of uncanniness is linked to unconscious desires and beliefs that are repressed, within the self, and yet through their repetitive nature, find their way back into consciousness and produce that discomfort, that aspect of the frightening we term the uncanny.

While his precursor Ernst Jentsch, according to Roy Sellars, “emphasizes that the uncanny arises from a certain experience of the uncertain or undecidable ... Freud decides, in other words, that the undecidable cannot be tolerated as a theoretical explanation, but it nonetheless recurs in his essay, undecidable.” (Royle, 2003:40) This means that the uncanny is not simply intellectual uncertainty; it is not simply a sense of not knowing or of indeterminacy. It is just as well something open and exhilarating that occurs in the mind. In this sense, Freud’s uncanny can be related to certain behaviour and desires that causes a crisis of normativity. This means that the modern sublime is perhaps not as much found within nature and supernatural experiences, as it is found within the human mind.

Freud recognized that uncanniness is a destabilizing threat to social norms and conventions, and according to literary critics, such as Harold Bloom, the uncanny is the sublime of our age. (Ellison, 2001:52-5) As he explains, Freud’s essay “can be said to have defined, for our century, what criticism once called the Sublime. An apprehension of a beyond or of the daemonic – a sense of transcendence – appears in literature or life ... when we feel that something uncanny is being represented, or conjured up, or at least intimated.” (Bloom, 1976) Just as Romanticism is impossible to understand without the sublime as one of its cardinal points, in the same way, modernism cannot be studied independently of its figuration of the uncanny. (Ellison, 2001:53)

This essay will explore the psychological aspects of Poe's sublime in order to clarify how his sublime can be seen in contrast to the Burkean sublime, the Romantic sublime of Wordsworth and Kant, and the modern sublime of Freud.

#### **1.4 Madness and Perversity in Literature.**

Madness has always been a continuous theme in western literature. Despite a diversity of approaches to madness, it seems possible to define madness as qualities of thought, speech, and behaviour which have been perceived markedly different from that of most other people. It has been described as "a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones" to the extent that "standards of logical thought and relevant emotion are confused and inappropriate." (Feder, 1980:5) However, Foucault, among others, have described the invention of madness as a disease that is in fact nothing less than a disease of our civilization. (Feder, Copper, 2009:VIII) This means that mad individuals are, above all, individual victims of society.

Although the varieties of madness created in literature are in most respects no different from those throughout human society, literature has, through the sublime and other means, found new ways of identifying the source of madness which in reality tend to lay hidden within the unconscious mind of man. (Feder, Copper, 2009:preface) In some aspects, it is possible to argue that Poe's stories feature the perversity of man, rather than madness itself. Robert T. Tally (2014:45) states that "Poe's tales of terror, grotesque, and arabesque, frequently posit something like "the spirit of perversity" as the underlying motive in human endeavours." The perverse, which literally suggests a "turning away" from what is thought to be right and good, can be seen as a "faculty" that Poe's narrators define as one of the *prima mobilia* of the human soul; a primitive

and irreducible sentiment that, “in the pure arrogance of reason, we have all overlooked.”  
(Sbriglia, 2013:8)

## **2. ANALYSIS.**

The following section will discuss the different aspects of Poe’s sublime in order to clarify how Poe’s writing is moving away from the Romantic conception of the sublime. For this reason, the chapter has been divided into three sections; sublimity of beauty and death, sublimity of the self and the familiar, and sublimity of sound and animals. Each chapter highlight different aspects of Edgar Allan Poe’s sublime, thus, making it easier to analyse and compare Poe’s sublime to the different theories of Burke, Wordsworth, Kant, and Freud.

### **2.1 Sublimity of Beauty and Death.**

*(The Fall of the House of Usher, Ligeia, The Descent into the Maelström, The Oval Portrait)*

*The death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.*

(Edgar Allan Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*, 1846)

In many of Edgar Allan Poe’s narratives there appears to be an obsession with the death of women. The sublime is often present in relation to beauty, but whether it makes itself apparent in beauty itself or in the destruction of beauty, and whether these two can be separated, is sometimes unclear. This section aims to explore whether Poe separates beauty and the sublime in his work, or if beauty, for Poe, can be more related to the uncanny of Freud.

There is a passage from “The Fall of the House of Usher” that is worth quoting

here as it illustrates a great example of how Poe uses the destruction of beauty to bring forth feelings of sublime value:

...there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated figure. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother... (Poe, 2012:64)

It is clear that Poe considered the death of a young and beautiful woman to be of aesthetic value and therefore used it frequently in his writing. Arguably, this is because a woman in death becomes even more beautiful because she has reached a state where she is unattainable. This characteristic of Poe's writing is also present in "Ligeia," where a young man falls in love with the beautiful Ligeia. Suffering from an unknown illness – just like Lady Madeline – Ligeia soon passes away and leaves her husband in a state of melancholy. It is probable that it is at this point that the beauty of Ligeia becomes something related to the aesthetics of the sublime. This is because the object of the narrator's affection is, in the laws of nature, no longer existent. As the narrator describes her, she was "the radiance of an opium-dream – an airy and spirit lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos." – "In beauty of face no maiden ever equalled her." (Poe, 2012:15) Merely the thought of Ligeia brings upon feelings of absolute dread for the narrator.

Nevertheless, there are also conceptions of beauty present in "Ligeia" that can be related to a 'natural sublime,' existing within a subjective perspective similar to the sublime described in the studies of both Wordsworth and Kant:

I recognized it, let me repeat, sometimes in the survey of a rapidly growing vine – in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean – in the falling of a meteor, I have felt it in the glances of unusually aged people ... by certain sounds from stringed

instruments, and not unfrequently by passages from book. (Poe, 2012:17)

Here, it becomes clear that when the narrator compares the aesthetics of Ligeia's beauty to other things of amazement in the world; not separating beauty and the sublime, beauty, just like events in everyday life is, in its un-repeatable and ungraspable sense, of sublime value. As Kant put it, the sublime is "sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy, but in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan." (Crowther, 1989:10) Therefore, Ligeia's beauty can be described as a case accompanied with "quiet wonder."

However, both Ligeia and Lady Madeline are also mystified characters, as the narrator in "Ligeia" explains: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia" (Poe, 2012:14) – "She came and departed as a shadow" (2012:15) proving her bizarre character. She can, in a sense, be linked to certain attributes we unconsciously believe to be inhuman and out of the ordinary; this causes a crisis of the natural, what one might have thought was part of human nature. She seems almost unreal as she walks about the house like a shadow – acting almost as a ghost, even in her mortal state.

The narrator's way of defamiliarising his dead wife results in her becoming something out of the ordinary; something "concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense of something supernatural" (Royle, 2003:1), which we term the uncanny. This shows us how the sublime in Poe's work seems to be supported by elements of the uncanny. This is worth noting in a passage when the narrator describes her nature when drawing closer to her death:

I saw that she must die – and I struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael. And the struggles of the passionate wife were, to my astonishment, even more energetic than my own. There had been much in her stern nature to impress me with the belief that, to her, death would have come without its

terrors; but not so. (Poe, 2012:19)

Just like in the case of Lady Madeline, there is something uncanny about Ligeia's struggle. Arguably, there is a certain uncanniness of women who manage to disturb the general conception of women as calm, comforting and caring mothers. While the destruction of beauty is of sublime value, Poe's way of breaking down the general conception of femininity can be read as a way of portraying the uncanny. This shows us that Poe's sublime is, in a sense, dependent on the uncanny – that discomfort we term the uncanny – when building up its effect. The uncanny seems to surround the sublime and, although they can be separated, their effects combine in such way that they empower one another.

In "A Descent into the Maelström," we get a closer look at how Poe combines beauty and the sublime. Upon being caught in the Maelström the sailor is suddenly struck with awareness and appreciation of the beauty of the Maelström and feels an unforgettable "sensation of awe, horror and admiration": (Poe, 2012:153) all words relatable to the Burkean sublime. However, there are also elements of the uncanny surrounding the sublime here, as Freud (2003:124) explains, the uncanny are those "unconscious desires and beliefs that are repressed, within the self, and yet through their repetitive nature, find their way back into consciousness." The sublimity of the beautiful Maelström can be seen in the fact that, by exhibiting beauty, it awakens uncanny desires within the sailor, to see and experience more; illustrating its powerful effect over the narrator. The desires awakened within the sailor are mostly related to death and, by giving into the sublimity of the Maelström, the sublime also seems to take his physical state closer to death:

It took less than a single day to change these hairs from jetty black to white, weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves, so that I tremble at the least

exertion, and am frightened at a shadow. (Poe, 2012:139)

Here, in the appreciation of the chaotic beauty of the Maelström it once again becomes clear that Poe does not separate beauty and the sublime. This also supports the idea that death, for Poe, represents some kind of ultimate state of being, where the cosmic truths hinted at by art actually exist. Human beings can illuminate the barest reflection of these truths, but they are in nature unattainable while remaining in a mortal state. This can often be seen in how women are portrayed in Poe's writings, who in death seem to be even more desirable and more beautiful because of their unattainability. Poe's statement that "the most poetical topic in the world" is "the death ... of a beautiful woman" (Poe, 1846) also reveals a belief that the deepest poetic and aesthetic truth can come only through death; only through death can we completely grasp the truths and beauty hinted at by art.

Poe's "The Oval Portrait," can be read as a metaphor of the act of such artistic representation. While the painter is working to create a picture of the absolute likeness of his wife, his real wife is slowly withering away. The more the picture begins to "attain" life, the more the wife's powers seem to fade – until, in the end, the painting achieved lifelike perfection and there is nothing left of the model. The illumination – the truth – of the wife's beauty is completed, but at the expense of her life. The aesthetics of the sublime present in the story can be seen in the narrator's first impression of the portrait: "I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute *life-likeness* of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and appalled me." (Poe, 2012:167) When the narrator realizes what the painter accomplished, he is experiencing a sense of horror – excitement, which is nothing but the sublime.

While the beauty of the portrait is, in itself, sublime, the creation of the portrait

and its effect on the painter's wife is also uncanny. It is uncanny in the sense that the transformation of the wife is "man-made," delivered by the hands of her very own husband. This is because a man-made disaster, in comparison to a natural disaster, is not unavoidable and we may therefore expect the painter to experience some sort of guilt. However, although the painter loves his bride above all, he does not realise the true effects of his work:

And he was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he *would* not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him. (Poe, 2012:167)

Drawn up in the sublimity of the beauty present in the portrait the painter does not seem willing to stop the process of his work for anything; not even for the sake of his wife's life. Perhaps her life is even worth giving up for the sake of attaining the unattainable.

In this sense, Poe's perverse characters, who actively seek either their own dissolution or the dissolution of those around them, arguable such as the sailor in "The Descent of the Maelström" and the painter in "The Oval Portrait" are the most successful artists; the closest to grasping the truths that lie beyond death. We can attempt to illuminate the barest reflection of these truths from beyond the grave, but they are by nature unattainable. However, as both Wordsworth's and Kant's theories imply, it is here important to remember that the experience of the sublime is subjective. These individuals are not just amazing artists because of their circumstances, but also because they, either consciously or unconsciously, seem to have adopted a certain ability to experience the sublime.



## 2.2 Sublimity of the Self and the Familiar.

*(The Fall of the House of Usher, Ligeia, The Imp of the Perverse, The Man of the Crowd, The Tell-Tale Heart)*

*When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience.*

(Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1909-14)

Throughout his work, Poe's sublime seems more and more reliant upon a subjective perversity, a "faculty" that Poe's narrators define as a primitive attribute of the human soul (Sbriglia, 2013:8), existing within certain individuals. This section will explore to what extent Poe's sublime is a subjective experience that seems dependent upon elements of the uncanny, and how this is illustrated in Poe's disturbance of domestic spaces that should be most familiar and comfortable, such as the house and the mind.

A great example of this is the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher," through whose eyes there seems to be no doubt of Roderick Usher's insanity. The most probable reason for the narrator to be drawn to the house of Usher is perversity. This can be seen in the fact that upon standing outside the house, he is overwhelmed by fear, yet he finds himself curiously drawn closer, into the house. As Sbriglia (2013:8) explains, perversity, from Latin *perversus*, is what causes us to "turn away from what is thought to be right." The narrator's fears are telling him to run away, yet his perversity allows him to approach the house. This mix of fear and fascination becomes obvious when describing the house which he is looking upon:

I know not how it was – but with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirits, I say insufferable, for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the

desolate or terrible. (Poe, 2012:44)

The narrator is here trying to describe one of the most powerful emotions that an individual is able to experience; it is that terrible experience of the sublime, and using vague terms such as “insufferable gloom” and “half pleasurable” shows a great struggle to express the emotions. This can be seen in the fact that instead of putting it plainly, he tries to describe his experience by contrasting it with images of less sublime value. This is similar to Burke’s theory that the sublime is something dangerous and overwhelming. However, while Burke insists that the sublime is an objective experience, not dependent on the self, there is arguably a difference here. Poe’s sublime seems to point at a subjective experience, a projection of the narrator’s mind. As Kant (1952:84) put it, the sublime is “merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought.” Proof of this can be found in the fact that the narrator is also experiencing a certain distrust in himself, in his own nature and ability to experience the sublime.

The narrator’s distrust is revealed to us in the narration style of the following paragraph. The protagonist’s repetition of adjectives with similar meanings: “a dull, dark, and soundless ... oppressively low ... singularly dreary... the melancholy House of Usher” (Poe, 2012:44) shows us a recurrent method of the narrator to ensure himself that his experience is real – a poetic way of maintaining a calm atmosphere. What we see here is distrust in the self, an insecurity about your own ability to grasp reality for what it is, to such an extent that the narrator needs to reassure himself several times over of the real aspects of his experience.

This extract from “Ligeia” shows us another example of distrust in self, and memory:

There is no point, among the many incomprehensible anomalies of science of mind, more thrillingly exciting than the fact – never, I believed, noticed in the

schools – that our endeavours to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves upon *the very verge* of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember. (Poe, 2012:17)

It becomes clear that Poe's sublime manifests itself as a force that exists within domestic spaces that should be most familiar and comfortable – the house and the mind, for example. When these spaces are disturbed, by something that inspires a sense of the uncanny, Poe's sublime is manifested. This makes it possible to see Poe's sublime in relation to the modern sublime of Freud. As Nicholas Royle (2003:1) explains; "it is a commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar" that causes that terror and discomfort we term the uncanny.

In order to go further with this theory, this passage from "The Imp of the Perverse" provides another great example of how Poe's work points to a strong relation between perversity and the sublime:

We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink away from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degree our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling... (Poe, 2002:213)

The essay seems to focus on the perversity of the narrator as a primitive part of human nature – a propensity to do wrong for wrong's sake. This has been read by many, including Stanley Cavell, (1995:20) as Poe's statement that "thinking will inherently betray the thinker." As the narrative continues:

...and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensation during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. (Poe, 2002:213)

While the thought of the abyss drives Poe's narrative over the edge, it is due to the perversity of the narrator that this thought allows for the sublime experience. This takes the subjective sublime of Wordsworth and Kant even further, as the experience of Poe's

sublime seems dependent on certain traits of an individual, traits that these individuals have adopted which allows for the sublime to be experienced. The result of Poe's sublime is, in this sense, a journey through inexpressible horror, and finally to a total loss of control. The destruction of control is here present in the unwanted impulse to jump and the uncanny desire to find out what happens if you do. This can be related to those repressed desires which are brought up from the unconscious to the conscious mind – causing that discomfort we term the uncanny.

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” we are presented with a narrator who repeatedly insists that he is sane, but through various manifestations of “unnatural” behaviour, we are encouraged not to trust the narrator's statement. Since the story is written from a first person perspective, it is, in a sense, unavoidably the narrator's perspective that we form a connection with. We realize that the narrator has a way of “turning away” from what is thought to be right and good, pointing to a perversity within the narrator, the underlying motive in human endeavours. In this sense, we know from the beginning that we are looking through the perspective of a person considered insane, but, due to our connection with the narrator, our attention is not focused directly upon the uncertainty of this individual until his behaviour causes a crisis of normativity, a crisis of what one might have thought part of human nature. It can be understood that Freud's uncanny is not simply intellectual uncertainty. Instead, Freud seemed to suggest that a certain perspective or behaviour that is for someone "heimlich" (familiar), can to the outsider be the very definition of the unfamiliar. As Freud further explained:

If we now go to review the persons and things, the impression, processes and situations that can arouse an especially strong and distinct sense of the uncanny in us ... E. Jentsch singles out, as an excellent case, ‘doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate’. (Freud, 2003:135)

While readers tend to want to identify with a character that they can relate to, Poe forces us to identify with the uncanny side of human nature that we wish to reject. This creates an uncanny environment as suddenly one's sense of "one's so called 'personality seems strangely questionable'" (Royle, 2003:1). There is that uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an "automaton."

For seven nights, the narrator opens the door to the old man's room. The process takes an hour and it is this precision which he insists proves his sanity. The narrator's insistence upon his sanity seems to be precisely what inclines the reader to distrust the narrator. This is because of the narrator's attitude, his lack of guilt and self-confidence which becomes in particular apparent in one passage:

I smiled – for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome ... I bought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim. (Poe, 2012:197)

There is that uncertainty regarding the personality of the narrator which here becomes concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious and with that sense of something unnatural that we term the uncanny. In fact, nothing in the story has been realistic up until this point, yet we have an uncanny experience when the heart begins to beat. The narrator seems to believe that he is in great control of his environments: able to subsume events within familiar "walls." This is why the heartbeat is so unsettling; it breaks apart the sensation of control that the narrator has been experiencing so far, resulting in a sense of the uncanny; that crisis of the natural.

This sensation of control, or rather, the uncanny destruction of control is much present in Poe's short stories. In "The Man of the Crowd" we encounter a narrator amusing himself by establishing "abstract generalizations" within which he subsumes

the characters who pass by:

The tribe of clerks was an obvious one ... The division of the upper clerks ... it was not possible to mistake ... There were many individuals of dashing appearance, whom I easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pick-pockets, with which all great cities are infested. (Poe, 2012:91)

The narrator is in control as he can put each individual into familiar categories, stating their essence and meaning. However, this procedure is interrupted by the appearance of a figure whose nature cannot be revealed. Here, the destruction of control allows for the sublime experience of the figure. However, the sublime experience of the figure also seems to support the idea that Poe's sublime seems dependent on certain traits of an individual that is, traits that these individuals have adopted which allows for the sublime to be experienced. It is due to the nature of the narrator, his perversity, that the fascination for the figure is brought about.

The narrator suggests that the meaning of the man will be revealed if he is pursued, that his destination will reveal meaning to his existence so he can categorize him within "the familiar." The narrator, as well as the reader, follows the man closely, expecting each detail to be a clue. However, as we become more familiar with the man, his strangeness increases and after several repeated turns we realize that we will perhaps never get the answers that we seek:

I was surprised, however, to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times. Poe, 2012:96)

The walk through the city seems to continue in an unending cycle, revealing nothing. The uncanniness of the man therefore remains impervious to all efforts to decipher it. The man is a mystery as he never reveals an interior; he never reveals a destination or purpose. But, in fact, it is also the lack of an interior, the presence of his lack of

destination and purpose that reveal a singular sense of the uncanny, as the man can neither be controlled nor categorized. Just like in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” there is that uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton.

In this sense, it becomes clear that while the Burkean sublime supports the sublime as an objective experience – not dependent on the self, Poe’s sublime reinforces the Romantic theory that the sublime is a subjective experience; a projection of the mind. In this section, however, it also becomes clear that it is the perversity of an individual that allows for the sublime experience. This takes the subjective sublime of Wordsworth and Kant even further, as the experience of Poe’s sublime seems dependent on certain traits of an individual, traits that these individuals have adopted which allows for the sublime to be experienced. Although sublimity is a “state of mind awakened by an object” (Monk, 1960:8) the sublime experience is also reliant upon certain attributes existing within the mind of an individual.

### **2.3 Sublimity of Sound and Animals.**

*(The Murders of the Rue Morgue, The Raven, The Black Cat, The Tell-Tale Heart)*

Both sound and animals are presented as sublime elements in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories. While both the Burkean and the Romantic sublime seem to point at a possibility of the sublime being experienced independently, there is a certain sense of interdependence amongst the concepts of the uncanny and the sublime in Poe’s work. Although they are separate forces, they seem dependent upon each other when building up their effect. This section will explore how animals and sound, through the means of uncanny events, become of sublime value.

One of the most famous stories of Poe featuring the sublimity of animals is “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” in which Poe presents us with a mystery that initially defies any rational explanation. The fact that Poe chooses to centre his story on an orang-utan does not seem to be an accident, given the on-going curiosity with the perceived similarities between humans and apes. In “The Aping Apes of Poe and Wright,” Peterson (2010:154) observes that the orang-utan is an “animal so singular that man cannot regard it without contemplating himself” – “neither in the face nor the feet, nor the upright gait, nor in any other aspect of his external structure does man differ from the apes” (Schiebinger, 1993:80). The sublimity of the ape can, in this sense, be seen in the fact that despite our similarities the ape is superior in both strength and size and therefore calls forward feelings of fantastic terror. Keith Tester (1991:30) also states that a species of animal may well be beyond human perception and that the creature is “made sublime – boundless – in the mind of the rational judging subject.” This means that animals are sublime because they “are judged (by individuals, by society) to be purposeless.” This theory is also much relatable to Kant’s idea that sublimity is “a state of mind awakened by an object” (Monk, 1960:8).

As mentioned in relation to “The Oval Portrait,” a man-made disaster, in comparison to a natural disaster, is not unavoidable and therefore causes that discomfort we term the uncanny. If we view the orang-utan as a man-made monster, it becomes difficult to determine whether the orang-utan is truly as beastlike as we like to think. In fact, the orang-utan commits the murders imitating the actions of its master, illustrating a human as the real source of its animality:

As the sailor looked in, the gigantic animal seized Madame L’Espanaye by the hair (which was loose, as she had been combing it), and was flourishing the razor about her face, in imitation of the motion of a barber. (Poe, 2012:137)



As humans and apes are placed in the same genus it is difficult to separate our humanity from their animality and the violence of the orang-utan can therefore be read as a confirmation of beastliness inherent in man. This points back to the idea that we are unable to regard the ape without contemplating ourselves. It is in this, I would like to argue, that we also find aspects of the uncanny. It is uncanny because the ape can be related to certain human behaviour that causes a crisis of normativity: the defamiliarization of the ape results in a sort of defamiliarization of the human race as well.

It is probable that Poe is using the uncanny elements associated with the orang-utan in order to reach out to the reader's fears – amplifying the sublimity of the ape. In fact, throughout his stories, Poe uses various instruments as powerful means of reaching out to unconscious fears and desires. In his poem "The Raven," the central image of the black bird repeatedly croaking propels the narrator into a state of anxiety. This is, arguably, first of all because of the mystifying quality of its utterance "Nevermore," the effects of which is sublime – leading the narrator into a state of amazement and "fantastic terror." This may seem strange if we are accustomed to understand loud and discordant sounds as the ones primarily associated with the sublime. After all, the raven's sound is nothing like that of a wild, uproarious animal, such as we observe in the Rue Morgue.

Burke, however, argues in his enquiry that it is not only loud sounds which bring about sublime effects. This means that even low and uncertain sounds, such as that of the raven, may produce the sublime. As Burke points out:

Night increases our terror more perhaps than anything else; it is our nature, that, when we do not know what may happen to us, to fear the worst that can happen to us; and hence it is, that uncertainty is so terrible, ... uncertain sounds are, when

the necessary disposition concurs, more alarming than a total silence. (Burke, *Intermitting*, 1909-14)

In “The Raven,” the narrator is unexpectedly awakened by the bird’s noise and upon hearing the “uncertain rustling of each purple curtain” is filled with “fantastic terror never felt before.” (Poe, 2002:773) In order to make this possible it seems that Poe, through the uncanny, illustrates an environment that allows for sublimity even in the tiniest of sounds. As Nicholas Royle (2003:1) explains: the uncanny “comes above all, perhaps, in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness.” In fact, when the narrator attempts to make sense of the meaning of the word “Nevermore,” what once was the peaceful, domestic setting of the scholar’s chamber (Poe, 2002:774) becomes the site of terror and of haunting memory for the narrator – the bird becomes for him a horrible beast or “devil;” (2002:775) a creature of the sublime.

Other examples of Poe using the aesthetics of sound and/or animals to reach out to unconscious fears can be found in many of his stories, including “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” In both cases the narrators seem to feel as if they are in total control, until this sensation is startled, resulting in a sort of self-destruction. In “The Black Cat,” just like in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator is arguing for his own sanity, and in a similar sense, we are encouraged not to believe him.

I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. (Poe, 2012:240)

Not only do we doubt the reasonableness of the narrator, we also start to dislike him because he turns into an abuser, not only mistreating his animals, but also his wife, sparing only his favourite pet; Pluto. In this sense, the narrator implies a certain

relationship with the cat as well as a certain respect which may be connected to unconscious fear of the animal. In fact, there is no denying that the narrator's feelings towards the cat can be related to what we have discussed about feelings of the sublime so far. Perhaps, the apparent sublimity of the cat that the narrator is experiencing is one of the truly uncanny elements of the story. As Burke states:

We have continually about us animals of a strength that is considerable, but not pernicious. Amongst these we never look for the sublime; it comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros. (Burke, Power, 1909-14)

Although we normally do not look upon housecats as sublime, Poe's sublime is of subjective character – making it possible for the sublime to appear in landscapes and creatures depending on the subject and upon the perversity of the subject, not the object. This can be related to Kant's theory of the sublime. According to Samuel Monk (1960:8), Kant made sublimity entirely subjective, “not a quality residing in the object, but a state of mind awakened by an object.” There is an uncanny experience in the sublimity of creatures that are not normally viewed in such light; as the experience becomes almost impossible for anyone but the viewer to make sense of. We are struck with a “feeling of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of ... what is being experienced” (Royle, 2003:1), which can be related to Freud's uncanny, causing a crisis of normativity.

The effects of the cat can be seen when the “much intoxicated” narrator returns home to find the cat in his way. He is “instantly possessed” by “the fury of a demon,” and the narrator pulls a knife, seizes the cat and “deliberately cut one of its eyes from the sockets” (Poe, 2012:241). As readers, we sense that discomfort that we term the uncanny when we try to make sense of the narrator's actions. We try to rationalize it by

pointing at the insanity of the narrator, but there is also the possibility that the cat is the true cause of the deed, causing that uncanny “feeling of uncertainty.”

The night after murdering the cat, the narrator’s home is burned to the ground. According to Tzvetan Todorov, (1995:110) one constant of the sublime is the “existence of being more powerful than man,” meaning that the realization that man is no longer superior to all other species results in a sensation of horror. This sensation of being in an inferior position is reinforced when the narrator later on finds a cat “closely resembling” the old cat. Here, we are presented with an apparent double whose existence can be classified as either accidental or supernatural. There is that uncanny uncertainty of whether the new cat is the old cat come back from death; can we believe that a ghostly cat is torturing the narrator or is this idea only in the mind of the narrator. Nevertheless, the narrator begins to feel an “absolute dread of the beast” (Poe, 2012:245) in the presence of the cat, proving that the narrator, through various manifestations of the uncanny, is experiencing the new cat as a sublime creature as well.

Both “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” feature characters who abandon common morality. In a final display of moral loss, the narrator – just like in “The Tell-Tale Heart” – taunts the police officers that are searching his home and even proceeds to tap his cane on the very wall that holds his wife’s body. In this instance, a “long, loud and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman ... such as might have arisen only from hell” (Poe, 2012:249) erupts from the wall. Earlier we discussed Burke’s theory that “some low, confused, uncertain sounds, leave us in a fearful anxiety concerning their causes.” Although the sound erupting from the wall is not low, it is confused and uncertain, leaving both the narrator and the reader in a fearful anxiety to make sense of it. Similarly to “The Raven,” the narrator is filled with “fantastic terror”

never felt before, but the sound itself is more similar to that of the orang-utan in “The Murders of the Rue Morgue;” that of a wild, uproarious animal. As Burke further explains, “the angry tones of wild beasts are equally capable of causing a great and awful sensation” (Burke, *The Cries of Animals*, 1909-14).

As both Kant and Wordsworth explain, the sublime is something we experience subjectively. Poe’s perverse characters then, in their way of “turning away” from what is thought to be right and good, seem to be able to find a temporary sensation of control through the annihilation of objects in their surroundings which they experience as sublime. However, Poe features the idea that if divine justice is gone, unconscious guilt, through various uncanny manifestations, will inherently lead to self-punishment. This takes Poe’s sublime closer to Freud’s uncanny as it visualises a certain sense of interconnection amongst the concepts of the uncanny and the sublime. It becomes clear that Poe uses the sublimity of sound and animals, amplified by uncanny events, as powerful means of reaching out to unconscious fears and desires.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

While exploring Edgar Allan Poe’s sublime in contrast to the Burkean sublime it becomes clear that beauty, both chaotic and full of wonder, is in its un-repeatable and ungraspable sense, sublime. As Kant put it, the sublime is “sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy, but in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan” (Crowther, 1989:10). In the appreciation of the natural beauty of Ligeia and the chaotic beauty of the Maelström it is made clear that Poe does not separate beauty and the sublime. This leads his interpretation of the sublime into looking more similar to the Kantian sublime.

While the Burkean sublime suggests that the sublime is an objective experience, not dependent on the self, Poe's sublime is of subjective character – making it possible for the sublime to appear in landscapes and creatures depending on the subject, and the perversity of the subject, not the object. In this sense, Poe's sublime can also be related to both the Romantic and Kantian sublime, allowing the individual to become of primary importance. As Kant (1952:84) explained, the sublime is “merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought, which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature.”

In order to make the sublime experience possible, however, it seems that Poe, through the uncanny, illustrates an environment that allows for it to be experienced. This makes it possible to relate his sublime to Freud's uncanny, that “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud, 2003:124). Poe's sublime then, amplified by uncanny events, seems to lead his narrative on a journey through inexpressible horror, to a total loss of their sense of one's own nature. What occurs is a destruction of the self rather than the affirmation of an individual's intellect over natural forces often seen in relation to the Romantic sublime. However, while the uncanny seems to drive his narrative over the edge, it is the perversity of the narrators that allows for the sublime experience. This takes the subjective sublime of Wordsworth and Kant even further as the experience of Poe's sublime seems dependent on certain traits of an individual, traits that these individuals have adopted, allowing for the sublime to be experienced.

His perverse characters, in their way of “turning away” from what is thought to be right and good, seem to be able to find a sensation of control through the annihilation of sublime and uncanny objects in their surroundings. In this sense, it becomes clear

that Poe uses the sublimity of sound and animals, amplified by uncanny events, as powerful means of reaching out to unconscious fears and desires. This takes his sublime closer to Freud's uncanny as, while both the Burkean and the Romantic sublime seemed to point at a possibility of the sublime to be experienced independently, his work visualises a certain sense of interdependence amongst the concepts of the uncanny and the sublime.

In this sense, it becomes clear that although Poe's sublime can be related to the different theories of Burke, Wordsworth, Kant and Freud, his sublime lands somewhere in between all of them. He moved away from the Burkean sublime by creating a subjective sublime where beauty and the sublime are not separated. In this sense, his sublime seems more similar to Romanticism and Kant, relying on the subjective response to sublimity. Through the perversity of his characters, however, Poe takes the subjective sublime even further, causing it to rely on certain individual traits that allow for the sublime to be experienced. Nevertheless, although the uncanny is very much present, it seems to be used merely as a means of amplifying the sublime that is not allowing the uncanny to act independently in his stories. It is this skilful and imaginative mix of sublime and uncanny elements that makes Edgar Allan Poe one of the most original authors of his time.

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