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**The Dream World And**

**The Dream Vision:**

**Meaning and Structure in Poe's Art**

**by**

**William R. Elkins**

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# The Dream World And The Dream Vision: Meaning and Structure in Poe's Art

by

William R. Elkins\*

With all that has been written about Edgar Allan Poe, about his particular kind of art, and about the presence or absence of meaning in his writings, Poe still emerges as a sort of curiosity in American literature — interesting, indeed, but only on the fringe of the proprieties of literature. He has been variously described as some half-madman, addicted to strong drink, drugs, and erotic sexual pleasures; or, as a misunderstood, clean-living aesthete who, unfortunately, predated our now highly developed psychological science and, therefore, was left to suffer alone. His work, likewise, evidences a duality of interpretation. On the one hand, it is tolerated simply as a contribution to literature of the short story type and the melodic poem. On the other hand, his work is often subjected to postmortem, psychological interpretation predicated on the madman thesis or based in Freudian areas. It appears that, even in the more recent studies, the tendency has been to take a position as regards Poe the man, or better perhaps, the specific morality of Poe the man, as requisite to understanding Poe the artist.

When, for instance, Edward H. Davidson says, "If sometimes there should be a connection between 'life' and 'literature,' it is virtually non-existent in the case of Edgar Poe,"<sup>1</sup> we are led to believe that here at last we will arrive at a discussion devoid of a specific moral insistence. Yet Mr. Davidson seems compelled to fall into the confusion which he initially decries. He writes:

One would like, for all time, to destroy the fictions that Poe was a drunkard (he could not drink: owing to a curious but well-known nervous sensibility, one drink of wine or whiskey made him virtually senseless); he was not a dope fiend (only once in his life he took laudanum to calm his nerves and he became violently ill); and he was not a rake. His life was, in fact, one of the dullest any figure of literary importance has lived in the past two hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston, 1956), p. VII.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. VIII.

In fairness to Mr. Davidson, we should note that he supplies a final disclaimer in which he acknowledges that "the best we can do is to look at the writings and decide for ourselves what they say and mean."<sup>3</sup> Still, the seed of a specific moral insistence has been planted.

Without laboring the issue further, the point remains that Mr. Davidson has little or no evidence with which to establish a moral character for Poe as specifically directed as in the above quotation; nor should we hope from the evidence available to concern ourselves with specifics. What we can do, however, seems more than merely examine Poe's writings for what they say and mean. Most certainly, we begin with and concentrate on the writings for meaning; we should not, however, ignore the artist completely.

Although we risk oversimplification, we can begin by accepting the fact that Edgar Allan Poe did not live an ordinary life. Almost from inception, Poe's life departed from the realm of the ordinary. We can hardly argue that loss of parents in relative infancy is indicative of a normal pattern of human existence. In a like manner, we hardly assume that a foster home (especially where elements of understanding are lacking) is in the normal tradition of maturing youth; nor may we contend that Poe's restless, roving, professional career fits a normal pattern. From the available evidence, we may suggest that Poe is the archetype of the displaced person with whom we have become increasingly familiar as our civilized world progresses. Poe saw, in the world about him, the disparity between the *what is* and the *what should be*; and, because he was a creative artist and a "lost soul," he sought to find himself in the world of his imagination; the dream world which he created in his writings.

Using then the general referent established above, we see that meaning in Poe's art may be correlated with the structural pattern in which he moves from the world of reality into the world of dream, and by which movement he attempts to recreate for the reader the agonizing frustrations confronting him as he flails about in the world of reality without an identity. It should not, then, seem inappropriate to suggest that Poe's art has a meaning which, in respect to modern existential philosophy, embraces a universality that permeates the whole realm of human experience. To reduce this statement further, Poe's letters show more than a normal concern with the bases of his own identity and the resulting frustrations motivated by his deep concern; his early poetry evidences his acceptance of the world of dream as his domain for the exercise of his search for identity; and his tales and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* display his more extended movement from the world of reality into the world of dream.

Beginning, then, with Poe's letters and poetry, we observe his personal struggle for identity unfold and his acceptance of the dream world as a fitting place for the expression of his inner conflicts. *If we accept Poe at his word, he had been a poet for quite a few years before the publication in 1827 of his first volume of poems. In a letter to John*

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. IX

Neal (October 1829) Poe stated that he was "about to publish a volume of 'poems' — the greater part written before I was fifteen." The opening sentence of the same letter and the general tone of the letter seem to emphasize that Poe wanted slyly to imply that he had always been a poet. He wrote:

I am young — not yet twenty — am a poet — if the deep worship of all beauty can make me one — and wish to be so in the common meaning of the word. I would give the world to embody one half the ideas afloat in my imagination. (32)

The letter to John Neal is important for other reasons and will be returned to later. It serves here to point out that Poe's first entry into imaginative art was through poetry and to point up a major difficulty encountered in dealing with the writings of Poe, the lack of accurate information by which we may date much of his material. We know only that the years preceding 1832 were artistically dedicated to poetry. Therefore, in these years, Poe's letters, particularly those addressed to John Allan, provide the bases for viewing his sense of lost identity and showing his almost pathetic attempt to find someone with whom to identify.

His letter to John Allan (March 19, 1827) indicates that his problem had been a constant one.

After my treatment on yesterday and what passed between us this morning, I can hardly think you will be surprised at the contents of this letter. My determination is at length taken — to leave your house and endeavor to find some place in this wide world where I will be treated — not as *you* have treated me — . . . . (7)

In a dramatic postscript, he wrote: "It depends upon yourself if hereafter you see or hear from me." The very next day he wrote again to John Allan that he was "in the greatest necessity, not having tasted food since yesterday morning. I have no where to sleep at night, but roam about the Streets — I am nearly exhausted — . . . ." (9) Even allowing for youthful over-dramatization, we cannot fail to observe the implications of his plight.

Poe did not write again to Allan until December 1828. This letter, written at Fort Moultrie where Poe was serving an enlistment in the Army, implies some sort of reconciliation with John Allan. Perhaps for this reason, and the possibility that army life had provided some sense of belonging, a new enthusiastic tone is noticeable. Poe wrote: "You need not fear for my future prosperity — I am altered from what you knew me, & am no longer a boy tossing about on the world without aim or consistency . . . ." (10) For all his new found confidence, his need of family is evident: "Write me once more if you do really forgive me and let me know how my Ma preserves her health, and the concerns of the family since my departure." (11) John Allan did not answer this letter nor the next some weeks later in which Poe dropped the brave attitude of the first letter and wrote:

. . . My father do not throw me aside as *degraded*. I will be an honor to your name.

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<sup>4</sup>The *Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), I, 32. References to Poe's letters in my text are from this source and will be noted by parenthetical page number.

Give my best to my Ma & to all friends —

If you determine to abandon me — here take [I my] farewell — Neglected — I will be doubly ambi [tious], & the world shall hear of the son whom you have thought unworthy of your notice. But if you let the love you bear me, outweigh the offence which I have given — then write me my father, quickly." (12)

It is possible to assume that in spite of Poe's efforts from 1827 — 1829 to effect a reconciliation with the only family he had known, he was unsuccessful and the break with John Allan which had begun many years before became more extensive. It appears that now Poe's search for identity took another turn. A letter from Baltimore (May 20, 1829) reveals that he had "succeeded in finding Grandmother & my relations — but the fact of my Grandfather's having been Quater Master General of the whole U. S. Army during the Revolutionary war is clearly established . . ." (16) He also said that he had been introduced to many important men who knew his grandfather.

The optimist might at this point presume that since Poe had located his grandmother, his aunt, his cousin and his brother, his need to identify would be satisfied. Such, however, was not the case. Either because the father image was too definitely related to John Allan, or, more practically, because his newly acquired family could not aid him, Poe continued his reliance on John Allan. During July, 1829, in financial trouble as usual, he again wrote John Allan seeking forgiveness. Allan's estrangement from Poe is evident in this letter in which Poe quotes from his foster father's letter the statement, "I am not particularly anxious to see you." (26) At the more practical level, Poe said of his relatives in Baltimore "My grandmother is extremely poor & ill (paralytic). My aunt Maria if possible still worse & Henry entirely given up to drink & unable to help himself, much less me . . ." (29) Whatever the reason, it was to John Allan that Poe continued to turn. He wrote to Allan until April, 1833. Allan died in March 1834. Poe's letters reflected always his desire for reconciliation and usually a plea for money.

Acknowledging all that we may reasonably assume from Poe's correspondence with John Allan, it is in the letter to John Neal mentioned earlier that we find his single most pronounced statement of the displacement he felt. He wrote:

. . . there can be no tie more strong than that of brother for brother — it is not so much that they love one another as that they both love the same parent — their affections are always running in the same direction — the same channel and cannot help mingling. I am and have been from my childhood, an idler. It cannot therefore be said that

I left a calling for this idle trade

'A duty broke — a father disobeyed —

for I have no father — nor mother. (32)

It is also in this letter that he refers to "Al Aaraaf" as "a tale of another world — the Star discovered by Tycho Brahe which appeared and disappeared so suddenly — or, rather it is no tale at all." (33) In an earlier letter to Isaac Lea, he acknowledged its source as "from Al Aaraaf of the Arabians, a medium between Heaven & Hell where men suffer no punishment, but yet do not attain that tranquil & even happiness which they suppose to be the characteristic of heavenly enjoyment." (18)



There are in other of Poe's letters many references to his sense of lost identity.<sup>5</sup> He continued to be interested in the ancestry of his family and continued to indicate that he had no friends, that he was alone. It would seem sufficient, however, to assume that Poe's chaotic sense of displacement has been amply shown and to proceed now to his early poems.

In the poetry written before Poe began to write prose tales, we find his overt expression of dream as his domain in such poems as "Dreams," "Spirits of the Dead," "A Dream Within a Dream," "A Dream," "Fairyland," and "The Valley of Unrest." The obvious autobiographical references can be noted in "Dreams."

Oh! that my young life were a lasting dream!  
My spirit not awak'ning till the beam  
Of an eternity should bring the morrow.  
Yes! tho' that long dream were of hopeless sorrow,  
'T were better than the cold reality  
Of waking life, to him whose heart must be,  
And hath been still, upon the lovely earth  
A chaos of deep passion, from his birth.<sup>6</sup>

Not only is the passage prophetic in that Poe's life assumed an almost "hopeless sorrow," but it appears as an apt summation to the sense of displacement that emerges from his letters. Among this group of early poems, one other, "A Dream Within a Dream," indicates more closely his acceptance of the dream world, and, more importantly to this study, what becomes his major structural technique of progressively moving further from the real world. First, he says, "You are not wrong, who deem/That my days have been a dream;" next, he declares that "All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream." (24) From these lines, it is apparent that for Poe only the world of dream exists. He continues:

I stand amid the roar  
Of a surf tormented shore,  
And I hold within my hand  
Grains of the golden sand —  
How few! yet how they creep  
Through my fingers to the deep,  
While I weep — while I weep! (25)

It would follow that the "roar of the surf tormented shore" represents reality only minutely evident from the few grains of remaining truth that he holds in his hand. Here the progression begins; for, as Poe implies he is not able to hold onto reality — characteristic of his tales, reality progressively ebbs away.

Avoiding more tedious examination, we can, nevertheless, assume that whether Poe was overtly expressing his relation to the dream world as in the poems mentioned before, or being slightly more subtle as in "Al Aaraaf," and "Israfel," he had early in his art adopted the world of dream for his expression. As he has to say much later in 1844,

<sup>5</sup>See *Letters*, I, pp. 113, 114, 120, 132, 190, 198, 236, 257; II, 339, 368.

<sup>6</sup>*The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, eds. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill (New York, 1946), p. 22. References to Poe's poems and tales, unless otherwise noted, are from this source and will be noted by parenthetical page number.

By a route obscure and lonely,  
 Haunted by ill angels only,  
 Where as Eidolon named NIGHT  
 On a black throne reigns upright,  
 I have reached these lands but newly  
 From an ultimate dim Thule —  
 From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,  
 Out of SPACE — out of TIME. (70)

Three years later he took his world which was out of space — out of time and created one of his own in his prose poem, *Eureka*.

Turning to the tales, we find that Poe, having almost abandoned his professed vocation of poet, extended the dream world begun in his poetry and developed techniques adapted to the prose medium. Within the first group, those five stories, probably written in 1832, the beginning of his patterns becomes evident. Of this group, consisting of "Metzengerstein," "Duc De L'Omelette," "A Tale of Jerusalem," "Loss of Breath," and "Bon-Bon," Poe's first tale, "Metzengerstein," as Quinn said, "stands out in contrast to the others in the group, not only in excellence but also in its general tone." In this first tale, we discover many of the techniques which he was to use later in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and in *Pym*. In relation to "Usher," we can parallel the final destruction of the castle, the destruction of the Baron; or, in a sense, the fall of the house of Metzengerstein. More important to this study, however, is his initiation of the dream progression.

Poe institutes what becomes his familiar opening pattern of non-orientation to the real world: "Horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages. Why then give a date to the story I have to tell?" (93) Immediately we recognize that for Poe the telling of his story needs no time, needs no real place. It is not a tale of time and place or one that can be equated with time and place. It is a tale that may have a conceivable beginning but for its meaning must move from the point of conceivability into the area where only the imagination can follow. For in Poe's work, as we have already noted, it is only in the imagination that he can find a way to proceed in his search for identity. "Metzengerstein" pictures for us a character who also cannot exist in the world that appears real to those around him. Into his world enters the specter horse — a means of conveyance away from reality which we see Poe use again in other forms in other tales and most effectively in *Pym*. Ultimately, in the tale, the horse carries its rider further from reality. In the final scenes the horse and rider become as one, and by one mighty leap into the burning castle conclude the tale but not the search — for Poe's final passage reads:

The fury of the tempest immediately died away, and a dead calm sullenly succeeded. A white flame still enveloped the building like a shroud, and streaming far away into the quiet atmosphere, shot forth a glare of preternatural light; while a cloud of smoke settled heavily over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of — a horse. (100)

Therefore, only what we know has ended. We have been carried by Poe to the limits of what we may understand in the imagination. Beyond this Poe cannot go. However, the huge cloud in the shape of

<sup>7</sup>Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1941), p. 192.

the horse is indicative of more that we do not know. The white flame, which must represent the blankness of nothingness, the cloud-like shape, its gigantic size, are repeated in other forms in *Pym*. We may say, then, that Poe has in his first tale prepared us for many of the tales to follow.

By itself, only one of the other four stories in this group is notable. "Loss of Breath" shows again the element of progression and the use of conveyance to make the journey. In this tale the character initially retains less of the real or conceivable than the Baron in "Metzengerstein." There is, however, still evident a distinct pattern of progression. From the habitat of the household, he proceeds through a weird stage ride, a more unreal and removed ride in a death cart, a suspension of reality by hanging, a burial, and, finally, a totally disoriented scene within the death tomb.

Before dispensing with this first group of stories, we should note that they show a sort of dream progression when placed in order of appearance.<sup>8</sup> From the more solidly based "Metzengerstein," Poe moved into complete grotesque dream in "Duc DeL'Omelette," further from the real world in "A Tale of Jerusalem," which takes place on the "tenth day of the month Thammuz, in the year of the world three thousand nine hundred and forty-one," (103) to the absurd grotesque in "Loss of Breath," and, finally, to the almost unreadable "Bon-Bon."

There is a ten month lapse between "Bon-Bon" (December 1832) and the publication of "Ms. Found in a Bottle" (October 1833). While admitting to a high degree of speculation, we may, nevertheless, presume that for Poe these months represented a disturbing era — one made acute by his disintegrating relations with John Allan. "Ms. Found in a Bottle" appears to be the rationalization of this problem. There are only three letters from Poe during this period. One, dated May 4, 1833, to Joseph T. and Edwin Buckingham refers to the existence of "Eleven Tales of the Arabesque" (53) and the letter had enclosed with it the manuscript of "Epimanes" which later was published as "Four Beasts in One." In this letter, Poe states that the eleven tales (of which he sent only one) "are supposed to be read at table by the eleven members of a literary club. These remarks are intended as a burlesque upon criticism." (53) Although Quinn believed that Poe "had evidently written, by this date, eleven of the group of stories later to be known as the Tales of the Folio Club,"<sup>9</sup> we can be reasonably certain of only five: "Epimanes," "Ms. Found in a Bottle," "Lionizing," "The Visionary," and "Siope." Of these only two were published in 1833 and 1834. Only three, "Lionizing," "Epimanes" ("Four Beasts in One"), and "Siope" ("Silence — A Fable") could be read to fulfill the purpose stated in Poe's letter to the Buckinghams.

Therefore, dealing with what we do know, we find in Poe's letter to John Allan (April 12, 1833) sufficient information to assume that during this period "Ms. Found in a Bottle" represents his major problem and his return to it. Poe wrote:

<sup>8</sup>See *Letters*, I, pp. 85 and 105, concerning the apparent inability to accurately date Poe's tales.

<sup>9</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, p. 201.

It has now been more than two years since you have assisted me and more than three since you have spoken to me. I feel little hope that you will pay any regard to this letter, but still I cannot refrain from making one more attempt to interest you in my behalf. If you will only consider in what a situation I am placed you will surely pity me — without friends, without any means, consequently of obtaining employment, I am perishing — absolutely perishing for want of aid. And yet I am not idle — nor addicted to any vice — nor have I committed any offense against society which would render me deserving of so hard a fate. For God's sake pity me, and save me from destruction. (40-50)

We cannot now fail to acknowledge the opening two sentences of "Ms. Found in a Bottle:" "Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill-usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (128) Obviously, the central character in the tale is representative of the displaced person and since he is a truly Poe character, being a writer, embarked on an incredible journey, we must know that:

Upon the whole, no person could be less liable than myself to be led away from the severe precincts of the truth by the *ignes fatui* of superstition. I have thought proper to premise thus much, lest the incredible tale I have to tell should be considered rather the raving of a crude imagination, than the positive experience of a mind to which the reveries of fancy have been a dead letter and a nullity. (129)

An examination of this passage in the opening paragraph seems to show Poe admitting all. He is asking us to understand that the intention of this piece is not fanciful flight but the revelation of the imagination in contention with the realities of experience. It would appear that more than casual attention should be given to this tale standing, as it does, at the end of Poe's calamitous experiences with John Allan. Three passages especially stand out. The first:

It is long since I first trod the deck of this horrible ship, and the rays of my destiny are, I think, gathering to a focus. Incomprehensible men! Wrapped up in meditations of a kind which I cannot divine, they pass me by unnoticed. Concealment is utter folly on my part, for the people *will not see* . . . . I shall from time to time continue this journal. It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavor. At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea. (133)

We do not, I believe, postulate too much in saying that "this horrible ship" peopled by "incomprehensible men" represents the world of reality and Poe's sense of displacement within it. Nor is it too improbable to read "Concealment is utter folly on my part, for the people *will not see*" as his statement of license to probe the dream world of his imagination feeling as he does the utter futility of contending with life at a real level where people in an apathetic world refuse to see his struggle for identity. In a like manner, Poe says that although he cannot make his plight known, he will continue to record the sensations of his predicament, and, like the Ms. in the bottle, cast his work before the public. Accepting this position leads to the second indicative passage.

To conceive the horror of my sensations, is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to

the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge — some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. (135)

From this passage, which in relation to the tale comes near the end of the incredible journey, we may assume that Poe is telling us most pertinently that he must ride out the voyage of life, live with and record the sensations which he feels and yet know that the full attainment of self-knowledge will always remain the final mystery. We cannot, Poe implies, go beyond the reproduction of the horrors which the individual encounters in his sense of displacement. There are limits to what we can communicate and limits to how far we may push our imagination in quest of self-knowledge. Only through attainment of that final mystery, death, can we go beyond.

Poe then stresses the language problem inherent in his attempt to recreate the horrors of his existence. He states:

When I look around me, I feel ashamed of my former apprehension. If I trembled at the blast which has hitherto attended us, shall I not stand aghast at a warring of wind and ocean, to convey any idea of which, the words tornado and simoon are trivial and ineffective. (135)

Thus "Ms. Found in a Bottle" appears as the first of Poe's stories completely and inextricably bound up with his sense of lost identity, with his desire to picture for the reader the horrors of his existence. In addition, he embellishes his pattern of progression from that seen in "Metzengerstein" and "Loss of Breath." Place becomes the sea as more detached from the world; progression is carried out by a mysterious ship moved by an unknown force toward unknown regions. The parallels with *Pym* are immediately obvious.

In 1834 Poe published only one story, "The Assig nation," which first and, perhaps more exactly, was entitled "The Visionary." To this tale Quinn gave little space, saying merely that it was "sheer melodrama, in which Poe took the situation from E. T. A. Hoffman's 'Doge and Dogaresa.'"<sup>10</sup> It would seem that this tale, too, deserves more than casual attention. In fact we may hypothesize that in "Metzengerstein," "Loss of Breath," "Ms. Found in a Bottle," and in "The Assig nation," we complete the dream patterns which Poe was to use in his other tales. Again we turn to the opening paragraph of the tale for another expression of Poe's sense of estrangement from the real world.

Ill-fated and mysterious man! — bewildered in the brilliancy of thine own imagination, and fallen in the flames of thine own youth! Again in fancy I behold thee! Once more thy form hath risen before me! — not — oh! as thou art — in the cold valley and shadow — but as thou *shouldst* be — squandering away a life of magnificent meditation in that city of dim visions, thine own Venice — . . . Yes! I repeat it — as thou *shouldst* be. There are surely other worlds than this — other thoughts than the thoughts of the multitude — other speculations than the speculation of the sophist. (136)

In this passage, we observe a combination of the distress personally found in life by Poe and his desire to find another world—a world of vision in which he may find a place for himself away from the multitude. There is also in the tale the same kind of progression from reality seen

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 214.

before. The Poe character is again on the water at the beginning of the tale. Since water — canal, river, sea — recurs often in his tales, Poe undoubtedly recognized that it was a fitting device. Most people are land oriented. They experience a kind of solidity and reality from the land. The sea or even detachment from the land on a canal or stream seems to bring about a sense of lost reality. In effect, the shaky suspension of man upon the water necessitates a reorientation on his part; or, in other words, he finds that he creates a new world. We know enough of Poe's background to accept his first-hand knowledge of extended sea voyages. Consequently, in writing his tales he made proper use of this technique. In addition, the sea — the world of the sailor — has universally represented a mystery for the mass of land-based humanity.

Following the progression further, we move to the scene of the disaster in a night lighted to an unnatural brilliance, which, in itself, resembles the vivid reproduction of a dream. From this beginning we are introduced to a mysterious stranger emerging from the shadows into the brilliance of dream-like arrested motion. Poe's descriptive powers in this scene present a superb tableau: a sight-sensation experienced by the subconscious in actual dream. As a structural technique, to mention only the more obvious, we see Poe's adoption of the tableau vision in the return from a state of semi-consciousness of the male character in "Berenice," in the entrance of Legs and Hugh into the charnal tavern in "King Pest," in the transformation scene in "Ligeia," "Madeline's entry into the study in the "The Fall of the House of Usher," the opening trial scene in "The Pit and the Pendulum," and the first sight of the catacombs in "The Cask of Amontillado."

Finally the Poe character visits the mysterious stranger at his apartment in which we again encounter another world. In this instance, Poe reverts to the more disoriented and grotesque atmosphere first apparent in "Metzengerstein" and used effectively in most of the tales. More specifically, in reference to Poe's use of the grotesque, we may suggest a duality of intent which at times merges in a given tale. Thus far in this study, I have implied only the relationship between Poe's sense of disorientation and the subsequent view of a horrible fictive world which it stimulated. Therefore, in the tales, Poe often adapted the distortion of the grotesque to merely heighten the tableau vision mentioned before. This adaptation we may associate with the tales given more than passing comment in this study.

In "The Assignation" Poe minutely alludes to yet another use of the grotesque. He says: "Besides some things are so completely ludicrous that a man *must* laugh or die." (138) This outlook would appear to account for the more obvious of Poe's hoaxes; those in which he burlesques the transcendentalists, other writers, the critics, and his view of society.

Poe's letter to Thomas W. White (April 30, 1835,) shows Poe defending and delineating his use of the grotesque. The letter is in answer to one in which his treatment in "Berenice" is considered too horrible. In answer Poe said:

The history of all magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted to it for articles *similar in nature* —

to *Berenice* — although, I grant you, far superior in style and execution. I say similar in *nature*. You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque; the fearful colored into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque; the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical. (57-58)

Another reference to Poe's double intent in his tales is found in his letter to John P. Kennedy, February 1836.

You are nearly but not altogether right in relation to the satire of some of my Tales. Most of them were *intended* for half banter, half satire — although I might not have fully acknowledged this to be their aim even to myself. "Lionizing" and "Loss of Breath" were satires properly speaking — at least so meant — the one of the rage of the Lions and the facility of becoming one — the other the extravagancies of Blackwood. (84)

Here then, in the tales mentioned to this point, we have uncovered the dream techniques which Poe was to use to a varying degree in the rest of his tales. By way of recapitulation, we see that Poe relied generally on two major techniques. First, he used the grotesque to create a world that was disoriented — that was literally "out of space, out of time." Second, he progressively heightened the grotesque atmosphere by conveying his characters further from reality. Within these two general areas we have already seen some of the more subtle techniques attendant to both.

It would not seem profitable to continue analyzing each of Poe's tales. Briefly, it is possible to classify, although there is constant overlapping, such tales as "Morella," "Berenice," and "Ligeia" as visions of heightened grotesquerie or to use Poe's own words "the fearful colored into the horrible. . . the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical." (58) Placing "Eleanora" with this group exemplifies Northrop Frye's comment relative to dream convention in which he says that in "dream there is a parallel dialectic, as there is both the wish fulfillment dream and the anxiety or nightmare dream of repugnance."<sup>11</sup> As also primarily relying on the progressively heightened grotesque, "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Black Cat," "The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "Hop-Frog" serve as prime examples. In addition to the tales already dealt with at some length in this study, there can be listed some others which exemplify Poe's techniques of progressive conveyance from reality. They are "Hans Phaal," "William Wilson," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," "The Island of the Fay," "The Oval Portrait," "The Balloon-Hoax," "The Domain of Arnheim," and "Mellonta Tauta."

It does seem profitable, however, to deal more fully with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. It is within this book, Poe's longest work, that he reaches the culmination of the dream techniques which appear piecemeal in various tales. In this sense, Mr. Davidson's placement of *Pym* at the "center; . . . between the poetry and the fully mastered prose in the short stories"<sup>12</sup> can be applied to Poe's use of dream technique.

<sup>11</sup>*Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N. J., 1957), p. 106.

<sup>12</sup>*Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 157-158.

Again Poe locates his story on the water and by a series of consistently more grotesque journeys conveys the reader further from reality. Additionally, he intensifies the horror of each journey by progressively reducing the visual contacts with reality.

Pym's first journey on the *Ariel* sets out, though not quite normally, as a drunken excursion on the sea made more unreal by the deceptive state of intoxication of his companion, Augustus. At the last moment the two men are snatched back to reality. Having established again an alliance with reality, they make preparations for the voyage on the *Grampus*. Almost immediately Pym retreats from the reality of shipboard life into the unreal atmosphere of his coffin-like packing box in the hold. Normalcy continues to ebb away in the mutiny of the crew and its subsequent reduction of humans aboard the ship, in the ferocity of the storm with its continued reduction of the human complement and reduction of the ship itself to, finally, an unrecognizable overturned hulk. By this time, all vestiges of the real world have ceased to exist and the characters in the book have diminished to two. Once more, having reached closely the final element of reduction — nothingness —, Pym and his companion, Peters, return to a semblance of reality aboard the *Jane Guy*. The process of reduction and withdrawal does not abate, however, as they proceed further into the unknown region of the South Pole eventually losing their contact with the *Jane Guy* by its destruction and the murder of the crew. In the final scene, the method of conveyance decreases from that of the various ships to a canoe carrying only Pym and Peters: visual reality reduces to black and white as the canoe ever more rapidly approaches a blinding whiteness containing the nearly imperceptible outline of a white figure. From this final whiteness — this final nothingness — no return can be believable. Thus the journey begun in "Ms. Found in a Bottle" has found its conclusion in the nothingness of Pym's last journey.

Poe's more elaborate use in *Pym* of his two major dream techniques is particularly apparent in two passages from the book. In both cases, Poe records the vision of a dream by his main character, Pym. The first:

My dreams were of the most terrific description . . . Among other miseries I was smothered to death between huge pillows . . . Immense serpents held me in their embrace . . . Then deserts, limitless, and of the most forlorn and awe-inspiring character, spread themselves out before me . . . Immensely tall trees, gray and leafless, rose up in endless succession as far as they could reach . . . The scene changed and I stood, naked and alone, amid the burning sand plains of Zahara.<sup>13</sup>

In this dream, Poe is paralleling the progression that we have seen take place. As in the book itself, the concurrent heightening of the grotesque and the reduction to near nothingness take place. In the second dream vision, Poe states flatly the importance he has placed on his two techniques.

Shortly after this period I fell into a state of partial insensibility, during which the most pleasing images floated in my imagination:

<sup>13</sup>*Selected Writings*, pp. 264-265.



such as green trees, waving meadows of ripe grain, processions of dancing girls, troops of cavalry and other phantasies. I now remembered that, in all which passed before my mind's eye, motion was a predominate idea. Thus I never fancied any stationary object, such as a house, a mountain, or anything of that kind; but windmills, ships, large birds, balloons, people on horseback, carriages driving furiously, and similar moving objects presented themselves in endless succession.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Poe's successive progression from reality becomes, at once, the culmination of his dream techniques as structure and the statement of meaning by implication. In this respect Poe's work becomes an important step toward modern literature. It exhibits, as we have seen, a struggle with identity and existence and by its structure comes close to the flattening out of planes and flattening of climaxes which William Barrett in *Irrational Man* notes as chief aspects of modern literature.<sup>15</sup> Finally, because of these same structural techniques, Poe's works represent a departure from many conventional uses of dream. The reader is not faced with the sense of ambiguity which arises from Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." Neither Poe nor the reader needs ask — was it a dream? It was.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>15</sup>William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (Garden City, N. Y., 1958), pp. 45-48.

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