

# The Motif of Madness in Selected Short Stories by E. A. Poe

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i  
književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Marko Ketović

**Motiv ludila u odabranim pripovijetkama E. A. Poea**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Ljubica Matek

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

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## Abstract

The motif of madness, the epitome of the Gothic genre and of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, serves as the impetus for the protagonists of the short stories “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “The Cask of Amontillado”, and “The Pit and the Pendulum”, which the paper analyzes and interprets. The introductory part explicates the social context of the Victorian era and defines madness in the frame of Gothic fiction, serving as a theoretical background for the analysis. An overview is given over the major social factors and advancements which contributed to the depiction of insanity in literature. The analytical part of the paper focuses on the root cause of the character’s insanity and how it shapes their thoughts and actions as they face their obsessions and surroundings. Their behavior and signs of insanity are contrasted, leading to the conclusion that madness can manifest itself in multiple ways such as obsession, excessive pride and paranoia.

Keywords: madness, Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “The Cask of Amontillado”, “The Pit and the Pendulum”.

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## Introduction

Gothic fiction appeared in the late eighteenth century and shares many features with other works of Romanticism, such as interest in strong passions and the supernatural. Its interest in death and violence is seen as a reflection of the causes and consequences of the French Revolution. The Victorian Era, which marked the period from 1837 to 1901, although not considered the cradle of the Gothic Literature genre, continued to give rise to a plethora of authors following gothic conventions, who incited by the social, political and economic circumstances of their time, decided to portray the morbid and uncanny side of society. Set in old mansions and houses with a chilling past, the works feature a sense of mystery and suspense as the characters try to overcome both external and internal trials. Dreams and omens play a great role in foreshadowing the fate of the protagonists, who either live at the brink of insanity or have to deal with inexplicable supernatural occurrences. The same motifs and themes are present in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, an American Romantic author<sup>1</sup>, who uses them effectively to evoke a feeling of terror and paranoia in the reader. He obscures the boundaries of sanity and madness, dream and reality, making the reader question whether everything in the plot is a fantasy in the deranged mind of the characters.

The aim of this paper is to examine the motif of madness during in Gothic literature, and more specifically, to analyze and compare the hues of madness portrayed in the selected stories of Edgar Allan Poe: “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “Cask of Amontillado” and “The Pit and the Pendulum”. It will expand upon the motivation of Poe’s characters and the cause of their fall into madness. By analyzing the social context of Poe’s period, the paper will shed light on the reasoning behind the emergence of the madness motif in literary works, as well as how society shaped the notion of insanity.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to being inspired by Romantic poets, Poe was also inspired by Victorians. It is well-known, for example, that Poe had written favourable reviews of Dickens' work and that he met Dickens in 1842 when Dickens came to the United States (Hawksley).



## 1. Social Context of the Victorian Era

In order to understand the themes and motifs of the Gothic genre, it is necessary to trace back the genre's development to the cultural setting that brought it into the limelight. The themes appearing in literature are almost always directly linked to the society in which the author lived. The crucial factors that sparked the interest of the Victorian culture in works with macabre and uncanny themes were the emergence of Spiritualism and further developments in the field of psychology. Formerly, the studies in the field of the human mind were more speculative than empirical and the notion of the human mind and body being symbiotic entities was still unexplored. With the rise of the Victorian era, many misconceptions about the human psyche were cleared as psychologists and scientists drew the conclusion that they had been analyzing it incorrectly. The intellectual and physical spheres of the human mind are closely linked and not just two independent instruments working separately, which was the way they were previously regarded. This causes a great shift in the approach of scientists, but also of society towards mental illness and people, who slowly began to acknowledge the significance of paying attention to mental illnesses and conditions. One of the biggest contributors to the study of psychiatry was the founder of psychoanalysis; Sigmund Freud. Freud explores the influence of repressed memories on the process of establishing a stable identity and the control of irrational drives over the human psyche. He specifically focuses on the unconscious as the locus of mental turmoil when brought into conflict with conscious material, causing various mental illnesses and disorders. By expanding the conception and understanding of the human mind, Freud enabled authors to portray various layers and hues of identity in their works. The primary interest among such writers was the sphere of the conscious mind or lack thereof. According to Andrew Escudero, "this was accomplished by using storytelling conventions to intricately interweave cultural myth, superstition, mystical and magical tales, fantasy and legend with current socio-political issues and historical events and figures" (178).

However, before the various breakthroughs in psychology and psychiatry, the tendency of frequent unjustified institutionalization of patients was at its peak. Due to the heightened awareness of the mentally ill, the slightest deviation from the norm in terms of behavior or manners resulted in the individual being shipped off to an asylum. Many less severe mental and emotional states were blown out of proportion and immediately diagnosed as madness. People and the society in general were uncertain about how to treat and deal with the mentally ill, causing the majority of them to be seen as outcasts. Shoshana Felman reflects on this

phenomenon: “the age casts madness outside of civilization and outside of society by physically confining it, by locking it up within the walls of mental institutions”. She explicates that “madness becomes the symptom of a culture, but the symptom is incorporated in a silenced body (and a silenced soul) whose suffering cannot say itself” (13).

As a result, Gothic writers of the Victorian era take it upon themselves to use their works in order to give voice to the marginalized and oppressed. It is “literature [that] interrogates and challenges this power, gives refuge and expression to what is socially medically repressed, objectified, unauthorized, denied and silenced” (Felman 14). Patients, unable to disclose the horrific treatment they have been submitted to due to them being heavily monitored and confined, had to rely on writers to reveal the truth about their victimization.

Interestingly, certain authors did not only write about madness, some were considered mad themselves. Edgar Allan Poe was regarded by many critics and society as mad and it was frequently implied that his works were inspired by personal events in his life. After Poe’s death, Rufus Griswold, an editor and critic who has held a grudge against Poe, became his literary executor. Kevin Hayes explains Griswold’s views on Poe: “Griswold harshly criticized Poe’s personal habits, depicting him as a misanthrope, a mad and melancholy loner, someone who wandered the city streets night and day, alternately mumbling curses or prayers and not much caring which was which. According to Griswold, Poe was devoid of honor, devoid of morality, devoid of any and all elevating personal qualities” (10). With time, society adopted this image of Poe as well. It was never confirmed whether Poe was really mad or not, but the real reason for his negative reputation may stem from the fact that he was not able to live up to the ideals imposed by the Victorian society. In a culture where being a gentleman, morally upright and honorable was an imperative, a bohemian like Poe definitely did not adhere to these norms. His morally questionable lifestyle and episodes of solitude and depression were seen by many as further indicators of his deteriorating mental health. The main telltale sign is, however, seen in his works, which certain readers interpret as the mirror of his psychological state. His grim stories and unreliable narrators are often perceived as the result of a deranged mind and not just pure inventions of imagination.

## **2. Madness as a motif of Gothic fiction**

Madness, one of the central themes of the grim genre of Gothic fiction, appears as a common thread in various literary works. In order to understand the use of the madness motif in the context of the Gothic genre, it is necessary to define it as a motif in literature in general. Lilian Feder offers the reasoning behind the appearance of the madness motif in her analysis: “the treatment of madness in literature reflects human ambivalence toward the mind itself; madness comprising its strangest manifestations, is also familiar, a fascinating and repellent exposure of the structures of dream and fantasy, of irrational fears and bizarre desires ordinarily hidden from the world and the conscious self”. Thus it can be inferred that the tendency of writers to write about madness stems from human need to express their fascination with their concealed inner thoughts and feelings which they are yet to understand.

Insanity often acts as the catalyst of the plot in literary works. In certain cases, it is portrayed as a hereditary ailment, however, in the majority of narratives it manifests itself as a direct result of an individual exposed to trauma. In instances where a person is under a great deal of emotional pressure and their senses are overwhelmed, their mind will resort to delusions in order to cope with the stress. The fine line between sanity and insanity is crossed when “the rational mind has reverted to the life of feeling, and when the connections to reality have been severed, while the healthy mind retains these rational threads of association with reality” (Berthold-Bond 199). The irrational drives and emotions awakened by the conflict of thought render characters susceptible to evil and at the same time act as their inner weakness. Sarah Wood Anderson explicates the causes and effects of trauma: “illness narratives often portray traumatized characters pulled by forces that compel them to express their pain within stories with repressive methods concealing their wounded minds. Conflicted by internalized regulations about sexuality and gender, these characters bear psychic wounds that affect their identity, behavior, and ultimately the narration of their trauma” (53). As a result, madness serves as the means of expressing and facing the inhibiting circumstances of a character’s life, while at the same time symbolizing the inability of the mad to appropriately rebel against those constraints. Madness represents a threat to the principles of the imposed eighteenth-century morality, as disintegration of the mind, violation of social norms, distorted worldview and delusions all reveal the true decadence of society. Foucault describes madness as “frenzy”, “a disorder of the spirit, or a disordered way of life, a whole obscure region of menacing rage that did not yet form grounds for a possible condemnation” (109).

There are various ways by the means of which madness is introduced into the narrative. With the use of reliable and unreliable narrators, writers toy with the reader, making it hard for them to discern illusions from reality in the plot. Usually there is “a narrator who (reliably or unreliably) claims to be a madman or, conversely, a narrator who claims to be sane but whose narrative perhaps says otherwise” (Felman 14) In both cases, authors leave clues in the form of temper tantrums, slips of the tongue and behavior out of character, which all foreshadow their real mental state. Another method is the overlapping of dream states, illusions and reality, where neither the protagonist nor the reader can determine what is fact and what is delusion. Because it is often misinterpreted as evil, the motif of madness is considered “obscure or ambivalent, [as] representations of these notions [appear] interchangeable; what may be deemed evil may also be madness, and what may be considered madness may also be evil” (Escudero 179).

In addition, the question about the purpose of writing about madness is raised. It allows the writer to convey social commentary and revolt against prejudice towards the mentally ill. The mad characters are often depicted living among civilized people where they are seen and treated as outcasts. This creates the feeling of otherness, awakening both pity and compassion in the reader. Even though such works heavily dramatize the emotional and social state of the protagonists, readers are able to identify with them because they generally represent outsiders. Works of Gothic fiction particularly focus on the fear of society from the unknown and different. They explore the influence of insanity on society and point towards the reasons why society feels threatened by the mad. The illusions of the mad mirror the irrational fears and superstitions rooted into human culture.

### **3. The Tell-Tale Heart**

Edgar Allan Poe's short story “The Tell-Tale Heart”, told by a first-person narrator, depicts the callously planned murder of an old man, as a result of the protagonist’s obsession. Despite executing the scheme flawlessly, the narrator, not wanting to be consumed by his conscience, admits the crime.:

TRUE! --nervous --very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses --not destroyed --not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily --how calmly I can tell you the whole story (Poe 259).

Here, one can recognize and refer back to Felman's explanation of the methods of communicating madness in literary works. This particular story features a protagonist who although clearly deranged, continues denying it and claims to be sane. This answer to an unasked question implies that the unnamed narrator in some way anticipates that the reader would find him mad and foreshadows further development of the plot. It is obvious that he acts very defensively when his sanity is questioned. With the narrator's mention of nervousness as an indicator of madness, Poe makes an allusion to the Victorian treatment of minor mental disorders, which were perceived as full-fledged cases of madness and medicated just as severely. The protagonist matter-of-factly acknowledges that it is an illness. However, he claims that it has done him more good than bad, diverging from the belief that such ailment deteriorates the senses. He even goes as far as to say that he is able to hear both heaven and hell, further corroborating his delusions. By claiming that he is sane and mentally stable because he can talk about his deed calmly, he indirectly plays into the stereotype of madmen and murderers being cold-blooded and shrewd. The narrator proceeds to explain that he is not aware how the idea to kill the old man crossed his mind as he is apparently unsure about the exact motive: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire" (Poe 260). He corrects himself stating the real reason: "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!" (Poe 260). It becomes evident that only until after the murder could he be really sure that the eye was his motive, pointing towards the fact that he himself doubted this irrational motivation. Further evidence of his madness can be found in his meticulous premeditation of the murder: "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded -- with what caution --with what foresight --with what dissimulation I went to work!" (Poe 260). He is still adamant on attempting to persuade the reader that he is not insane and comments that madmen are not capable of such carefully thought through plans, unlike him, who is very much sane and collected.

His obsession with the old man's eye culminates during the several nights when he stealthily enters his room in order to observe it. The fact that the old man is unaware that the narrator watches him sleep from the darkness entertains him greatly. He is so fixed on his plan that he does not even fall back when the old man hears him and spends a whole hour just standing in the room, basking in the old man's agony. At one point the old man lets out a terrified groan and the narrator immediately recognizes that sound as something familiar:

It was not a groan of pain or of grief --oh, no! --it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a

night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. (Poe 260)

The narrator identifies with the old man in his moment of terror and reveals that he has experienced it as well. Unlike the man, who is paralyzed due to fear, the narrator's coping mechanism manifests itself quite differently. As the emergence of madness is often attributed to trauma and moments where the senses are overwhelmed, it may be deduced that exactly this feeling of horror imposed by the old man's grotesque eye was the trigger that blurred the line between sanity and madness in the narrator. The old man himself, who was already paranoid, could have been driven to madness as well if the narrator had kept up his nightly visits. The narrator even admits that he pities him, but he cannot help but to manically laugh at his fear on the inside. While he revels in the old man's suffering, the old man futilely tries to find a rational reason of the sounds he is hearing, to the narrator's utter amusement. He once again addresses the reader and tries to dispel the belief that he is mad: "And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?" (Poe 261). He is already aware that the reader considers him mad, yet this time he tries to portray madness as something positive. It is not a disease, but a blessing in disguise, which imbues him with heightened sensitivity. As the old man grew more and more terrified, his loudly beating heart "excited [the narrator] to uncontrollable terror" (Poe 261). He would have enjoyed the man's agony a bit longer had it not been for the fear that neighbors would hear the intense heartbeat. On the spur of the moment, the narrator lunges at the old man, killing him on the spot. Self-satisfied, he smiles like a real psychopath, marking his triumph over the evil eye. Finally, the reader is addressed one last time: "If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body" (Poe 261). Here, like in the other instances where the narrator directly speaks to the reader, Poe applies irony to amplify the impression of the narrator's mental state. The madman repeatedly states that he is not mad, yet the arguments he provides to prove his sanity contradict each other, making him appear even more insane. It is the way he disposed of the body, that shows that he is not just deranged, but a true calculating mastermind. He proceeds bragging how meticulously he worked on hiding the body without leaving any visible trace behind to the point that he even laughs about it. Soon after he was finished, three policemen arrive at his door. He remains calm and collected, thinking that he has nothing to fear. Without a second thought, he shows them around the house and ultimately leads them in the old man's room, taking a seat of the exact same spot where the body was hidden.

Even though he is pleased that he has convinced the officers, the pent up guilt takes its toll on the narrator. The initial sharpness of mind he repeatedly imposes to the reader throughout the story is suddenly replaced by utter lunacy. His guilt-ridden conscience causes him to hear what appears to be the beating heart of the old man. As the sound becomes louder, the narrator becomes more livid, to the point that he accuses the officers of ridiculing his misery. Ultimately, after several temper tantrums, he admits to have killed the old man as he could not bear the sound anymore. In the last scene, Poe effectively uses the first person point of view to allow the reader to experience the narrator's physical, mental and emotional changes first-hand. The use of a long string of exclamatory sentences leading up to his confession, which appear like a stream of consciousness, faithfully portray his mental downfall.

The killing of the old man, which the narrator justified with an alleged fear of the evil eye, could also be interpreted as the attempt of subduing his mental illness. It is obvious that he thinks that the eye is at fault for his paranoia and dread, when this could just be an excuse to exert his perversions. Nevertheless, his attempt fails as his insanity torments him, even after the old man is dead. Due to him being so cunning and vile, there is a possibility that he might be lying to the reader too, the whole confession being a fabrication of his madness.

#### **4. The Cask of Amontillado**

In the story "Cask of Amontillado", Poe introduces the reader to Montresor, a prideful man who holds a grudge against a fellow countryman and is seeking vengeance. His desire for revenge, however, takes him into the sphere of madness, as he kills Fortunato in the cruelest way.

In the opening lines the narrator reveals a brief history of the feud between him and Fortunato:

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely, settled --but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong. (Poe 464)

Montresor presents himself a rather generous and forgiving person, who never condemned Fortunato for the disrespect he showed him. However, he draws the line at personal insult. It is never specified what those “thousand injuries” were and what Fortunato exactly did to insult Montresor, suggesting Montresor’s status as an unreliable narrator, who deliberately withholds crucial information from the reader. He addresses the reader as if he were a longtime friend, who is full of understanding and will not judge, when in reality it is impossible to know anything about his past as he has not revealed any information yet. This can be interpreted as the narrator’s delusion or his manipulative, ironic approach in order to gain sympathy from the reader. He proceeds presenting his plan of revenge, speaking as if he were some higher authority allowed to punish whatever he regards as misdeed. Montresor believes that in order for justice to be served, he has to punish Fortunato without being held accountable. It will be of no meaning if he does not manage to make Fortunato feel the emotional injuries he felt.

The true extent of his desire for revenge is revealed when Montresor indirectly addresses the reader: “It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my in to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation” (Poe 465). He practically brags how inconspicuously he managed to act when talking with Fortunato, gloating over the fact that he is unaware of his imminent demise. This statement marks the emergence of a deranged mastermind. He cleverly plots to exploit Fortunato’s greatest weakness, his refined taste in wines.

The setting itself foreshadows Montresor’s decline towards madness. “the supreme madness of the carnival season” (Poe 465) mirrors his own insanity which is reaching his peak. Poe uses the carnival season, the time where everybody wears masks, as an ironical backdrop, because in this story the masks actually fall and true identities are revealed. Also, by using the carnival festivities as the time to execute his revenge, Poe shows how cunning Montresor actually is, because hidden behind a mask, he can easily use the commotion of the crowd to lure and sneak away with Fortunato unnoticed. In addition, he knew that Fortunato’s love for wine would not allow him to resist the drinks, leaving him inebriated and making him an easy target. When the two finally meet during the festival, Montresor once again puts up his façade of congeniality greeting Fortunato warmly. He is so excited to finally seize the opportunity for revenge, that for a split second his mask slips and he wrings Fortunato’s hand, unable to control his hatred. The devious ploy of luring in Fortunato works perfectly as Montresor asks for his wine expertise in order to determine whether the newly acquired one is in fact the rare



Amontillado. Moreover, he exploits another weak point of Fortunato, namely his pride, by bringing up another wine connoisseur. After making sure that none of his servants are present at the house, Montresor leads him into the vault. Thus begins his play and torture. Even though he is aware that Fortunato has his eyes set on the Amontillado, Montresor continues toying with him, suggesting to turn back as the damp vault might hurt his health. His ironic behavior is especially visible in the moment after Fortunato has a coughing fit: "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible" (Poe 466). By doing so, he lulls Fortunato into a false sense of safety and once again exploits his pride knowing that Fortunato will not turn back as he does not want to appear weak.

Furthermore, as Fortunato questions Montresor's ancestry, the possibly hereditary reason for his madness is revealed. The coat of arms of the Montresor family portrays "A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel" (Poe 466). In this case, Montresor is the foot and Fortunato being the serpent. The family motto, which translates "No one can harm me unpunished", implies that the family felt superior in comparison to others and was above the law, acting like an authority and punishing freely anybody who does them wrong. Montresor might just be following a perverted family tradition. On the other hand, because the disturbing image of the coat of arms and the motto match up a little too conveniently to his motives, there is a possibility that Montresor has actually made everything up just to indirectly warn Fortunato, once again toying with him.

At last, as they arrive in the crypt, Montresor chains the now inebriated Fortunato to a wall. He starts walling up the entrance, burying Fortunato alive. Even though he has been fixated on the idea of executing Fortunato, he repeatedly refers to him as "my friend" and "my poor friend", suggesting either that he does actually care about him, but his deranged mind does not allow him to abandon his goal or that he is so deluded that he is not even aware what kind of atrocity he is committing, but most likely, he is just saying this ironically as a true psychopath. Just as Montresor is about to lay the last few bricks, Fortunato, slowly recovering from the effects of the wine, realizes what is really happening. In hopes that someone would hear him, he starts screaming at the top of his lungs. Montresor, rather frightened, inspects the wall: "I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall; I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still" (Poe 468). He admits that he is content,

finally getting his revenge. However, after the deed is done, he no longer seems like the cunning and rational mastermind who managed to execute a flawless murder. The chilling scene as he screams at Fortunato, trying to outdo his screams, shows the real Montresor, without the fake pleasantries or kindness, entirely devoid of any morality and conscience. He continues to mimic Fortunato, who is still hoping that the whole scheme has been a joke, repeating his words and telling him ironically that they should get going, when it is obvious that he is leaving him there. “My heart grew sick” says the narrator, giving a glimpse of hope that he does indeed feel regret for what he has done. However, he quickly follows up that it is not the vile act that makes him sick, “it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so” (Poe 468). Thus he ultimately confirms that does not experience any remorse whatsoever, solidifying his status of a deranged mind. Finally, before leaving him to perish in the catacombs for fifty years, he wishes Fortunato to rest in peace, as if he was not the one who sealed his fate in the first place. Leonard W. Engel offers a symbolic explanation of the burial: “[Montresor] is trying to isolate, and enclose, a part of himself and a neurosis he hates - symbolized by Fortunato: Once his victim is walled up and Montresor's neurosis is in a sense buried and out of sight, he believes he will probably regain some measure of sanity” (4). If this is the case, Montresor’s plan actually backfired, as he is unable to forget what he has done and has been haunted by it for over 50 years. The entombment, if anything, made his insanity more apparent.

## **5. The Pit and the Pendulum**

The short story “The Pit and the Pendulum” takes the reader back to the time of the Spanish inquisition, as an unnamed narrator struggles to cope with his death sentence and merciless torturers.

“I WAS sick--sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me” (Poe 50) says the unnamed narrator at the very beginning of the story, acknowledging that something is in fact wrong, as he is losing control of his senses and his health is deteriorating. The reader learns that the narrator is being held captive and has been tortured, as is evident by his fragile physical and mental state. The inquisitors sentence him to death, dealing such a blow to the narrator’s psyche that he is spirited away in to a dream-like state, symbolizing his descent into madness. He starts seeing grotesque figures of the judges sealing his fate and while aware of the things happening around him, he cannot make any sense of it due to his hypersensitivity. He experiences “delirious

horror” as he sees the candles which are laid out on the table, perceiving them as angels who came to save him, yet this notion quickly disappears together with the flickering flames. Berthold-Bond explains this phenomenon: “Insanity is a response to the developed mind's encounter with an experience of pain that it cannot cope with” (Berthold-Bond 102). In the case of the narrator, it is not only the physical pain he experiences from the torture, but also the psychological one, being aware that he is awaiting his certain death. In order to endure the stress, he retreats into madness as a self-protective measure, what Berthold-Bond describes as a “therapeutic attempt”. This feeling culminates in the narrator as everything begins to fade and he faints. He describes it as “all [his] sensations [being] swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades” (Poe 50). Hades not only represents the narrator’s feeling of being in hell, but also the fact that in the underworld the soul is separated from the body, just like his sanity is separated from his mind.

As he comes round, the narrator utters: “I had swooned; but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost. What of it there remained I will not attempt to define, or even to describe; yet all was not lost. In the deepest slumber--no! In delirium--no! In a swoon--no! In death--no! even in the grave all is not lost” (Poe 50). Although aware of the slow disintegration of his mind due to the suffering and harassment, he refuses to let go of the little sanity and awareness he has left. He adamantly claims nothing can separate him from consciousness, not even death. Berthold-Bond, by quoting both Hegel and Freud, explains this as “the essential human craving for unity” and the desire of “being one with the external world as a whole” (Berthold-Bond 102). Thus, it is ingrained in the human nature to hold onto consciousness, just like the narrator does. He tries to rationalize the situation, hoping that it was only a dream, yet what troubles him is that he cannot recall the “dream”, but also cannot discern whether he is in fact alive or dead. He desperately tries to recall any kind of memory, image, sound at moments dreaming that he is managing to do so and at others creating own recollections amid all the delusion. Bewildered by his own inability to grasp his surroundings, he realizes that he is going mad: “then all is madness--the madness of a memory which busies itself among forbidden things” (Poe 51). He cannot trust his own senses. All of a sudden the narrator regains his senses, experiencing a rush of terror, hearing his own heartbeat, feeling his body, being aware that he is alive and that he exists. However, the consciousness he so strongly coveted is replaced by “a strong desire to lapse into insensibility” (Poe 51) implying that he would rather slip back into the dream state and madness itself, than face reality. This is further visible when the narrator becomes aware that he can freely move, but decides to lay still and keep his eyes closed: “I

longed, yet dared not to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see” (Poe 51). His worst fear does come true, because as he opens his eyes, he is surrounded by oppressing darkness. He is now sure that he is alive, but tries to deduce why that is so, as most captives are executed right away. The futile attempts of the narrator to inspect the room he is located in repeatedly result in him fainting or falling asleep. With every awakening, it becomes clear that the inquisitors do not want to execute him quickly, but torture both his body and mind, which the narrator also comprehends. As a result, he grows paranoid: “By long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which awaited me” (Poe 53). Knowing that such punishment is far worse than any kind of physical torture, the narrator contemplates about taking his own life, but due to being a coward, he decides against it. The “agitation of spirit” (Poe 53), which renders him unable to fall asleep, can be interpreted as a further sign of his madness, as such psychological restlessness often appears as a symptom of mental disorders.

Having been previously tortured by his inability to see or move, now, as he wakes up tied to a wooden board, the narrator is tortured by the awareness that a swinging blade is slowly descending towards him, when there is no possibility of escape. The moment that goes to show that the narrator has gone completely insane is when he uses irony and laughter as a coping mechanism for his impending demise: “Having failed to fall, it was no part of the demon plan to hurl me into the abyss; and thus (there being no alternative) a different and a milder destruction awaited me. Milder! I half smiled in my agony as I thought of such application of such a term” (Poe 55). The scythe descends more and more, but over a course of time unknown to narrator, driving him “frantically mad” to the point that he attempts to move toward the blade to end his misery, instead of trying to move away from it. His determination, however, quickly ceases as the narrator “suddenly [feels] calm, and lay[s] smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble”(Poe 55). Being exposed to such extreme mental torment at the verge of dying, the narrator's mind once again resorts to madness, putting him in an oblivious, child-like state. Devoid of any hope, the narrator summarizes his situation: “Long suffering had nearly annihilated all my ordinary powers of mind. I was an imbecile--an idiot” (Poe 56). He becomes completely fixated on the pendulum, even finding excitement in its swift movements and piercing sounds that he starts laughing and howling at it. The bisecting blade symbolically represents “a fragmentation of the psyche into ego and non-ego, male and female aspects of the mind” (Malloy 9). Nevertheless, the narrator reaches for the last bit of consciousness, finding

hope, which he considered long lost, and with his ingenuity manages to escape the pendulum. Finally free, he starts having visions of the figures on the wall, glowing in a wild crimson while the wall itself changes shape, coming closer and pushing him into the pit. His last scream for help is heard and he is rescued by the French.

Poe once again puts focus on the mental state of the unreliable narrator, who, deprived of perception, suffers in the hands of his captors. The setting almost acts as a character, as it largely contributes to the narrator's paranoia, causing his physical and mental decline. Through the first person point of view, the reader sees and experiences every illusion, thought and emotion of the narrator, ultimately sympathizing and pitying him.

## **6. Comparison of madness**

The stories "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado" follow similar plot lines, as both narrators are compelled to murder by an irrational reason, the unnamed narrator acting to rid himself of the terrifying eye and Montresor reacting to a petty insult. Montresor is motivated by revenge, while the other is motivated by obsession. The two are equally devious and deceptive, crafting calculated plans to get rid of their unsuspecting prey, Montresor being a much worse sociopath, feeling no remorse whatsoever and getting away with the murder, unlike the protagonist from "The Tell-Tell Heart" who is eventually overcome by guilt. Another difference is that the unnamed narrator acknowledges from the start that his intentions are insane, continually denying them, when Montresor on the other had believes that he is just delivering justice. They both enjoy the torment they cast upon their victims to the point of laughing at the point of execution.

Unlike the first two characters, the one from "The Pit and the Pendulum" is the only one whose madness manifests itself as a result of physical and mental suffering and not just something innate, present in his nature. He was probably sane before he was imprisoned and the time in the claustrophobic dungeon was his breaking point. He shares the experience of heightened senses with the protagonist of the first story, but also periods of insensibility, considering it more of a curse than a blessing. By holding onto the last thread of sanity, he is also the only one who does not end up entirely mad, as he is shown acting rationally on multiple occasions.

All three protagonists experience bouts of paranoia, the first two due to fear of getting caught during their murderous acts and the third one due to the uncertainty of not knowing

what will happen to him next. Irony and humour present their main way of dealing with their mental instability.

## **Conclusion**

The short stories “The Tell-tale Heart”, “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Pit and the Pendulum”, all reaffirm the status of madness as one of the pivotal themes of the works of writer Edgar Allan Poe, as well as Gothic fiction in general. Even though each of the stories features a main character who eventually lapses into madness or is mad from the beginning, the motivation and cause of the mental decline is unique to the individual. Poe introduces the reader to a paranoid narrator driven by the irrational obsession and fear of an old man’s eye, a resentful narrator sworn to vengeance no matter how cruel and a tortured narrator torn between dream and reality, portraying the fine nuances of insanity. By employing the first person narrator, Poe allows the reader to immerse himself into the setting and mind of the protagonist. The descriptions of the deranged minds are emphasized through the use of irony and unreliable storytelling, which conveys the real extent of insanity. With his depiction of various emotional and mental states in the aforementioned stories, he reflects the social problems that plagued nineteenth-century society and raises theme of otherness, addressing the fears and prejudice.

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