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Kaitlyn Quinn

kaitlyn.quinn@student.shu.edu

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Edgar Allan Poe: Addressing the Haunting Legacy of American Exceptionalism

M. A. Seton Hall University, May 2021

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

College of Arts and Sciences

Seton Hall University

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Seton Hall University

College of Arts and Sciences

Department of English

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THE MASTERS THESIS

This Thesis, “Edgar Allan Poe: Addressing the Haunting Legacy of American Exceptionalism,”
by Kaitlyn Quinn, has been approved for submission

for the Degree of Master of Arts in English (Writing) by:

Approved by:

Mary Balkun, Thesis Advisor

Russell Sbriglia, Second Reader

Introduction

The term “American exceptionalism” is synonymous with the American identity, yet if not carefully examined, it can prove to be a dangerous association. Donald E. Pease in “American Exceptionalism” states, “Despite [John] Winthrop’s ‘A Model of Christian Charity,’ (1630) fostering a tendency to view America in religious terms— ‘America ’ as an elect nation and ‘Americans’ as a chosen people—American exceptionalism was more decisively shaped by the ideals of the European Enlightenment” (Pease). A Puritan leader, John Winthrop first introduced the notion of “American exceptionalism” in his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” aboard the *Arabella* in 1630. Winthrop spoke to his followers before leading them to establish the British colony of Massachusetts Bay, stirring them with the words, “For wee must consider that wee shall be as a city upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us” (Winthrop 2). His stirring sermon “has become one of the sacred texts of ...American history known as ‘American Exceptionalism’” (Hodgson 1), yet “he was an Englishman, albeit one whose religious beliefs put him at odds with the contemporary government of King Charles I” (Hodgson 2). Winthrop intended to found another version of England, where he and his Puritan followers could enjoy the religious freedoms they could not possess in their homeland. Certainly, his words resonated with the Puritans as they built their “city on a hill,” but “it should be noted at the outset that Winthrop’s sermon, which contains the famous phrase calling the Massachusetts Bay Colony a ‘city on a hill,’ is not about America at all,” according to Justin B. Litke in “The Problem of American Exceptionalism” from his book *Twilight of the Republic* (Litke 18). Instead, the Puritans intended to “return to England...as rulers and lawgivers to remake English and all Christian society in New England’s image” (Litke 19).

As John Engle asserts in “Political Symbols and American Exceptionalism,” “governments have a vested interest in preserving the identity and continuation of their state. One of the most common ways of doing so is to create a national myth to which all citizens can subscribe” (Engle 324). The enduring myth of America being “a city on a hill” must be examined through the lens of darker historical events, such as the fact that the United States was founded on soil already belonging to Native Americans. As Jerome McGann asserts in “Colonial Exceptionalism on Native Grounds: American Literature before American Literature,” “with few early American exceptions—Thomas Morton and Williams are notable—the colonial view was that the [indigenous] Americans were barbarous savages or even devils” (McGann 6). Ultimately, settlers wished to establish a country of their own, and fought against the existence of Native Americans to do so, excusing their misdeeds with beliefs such as those of scholar “Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, [who] held that human advancement came from linguistic and mental refinement” (Harvey). Native Americans, then, could no longer live freely on their own land; instead, white settlers quickly created a place where they could enjoy the privileges of freedom, while simultaneously oppressing them. Despite such contradictions, Americans still regarded themselves as “exceptional,” as did other nations “due to the early advent of universal white manhood suffrage, the degree of upward mobility, or the abundance of job and business opportunities and American natural resources” (Litke 5-6).

American gothic literature draws inspiration from these dark aspects of American history. As Leslie Fielder observes in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, “the tradition of the American novel” is “almost essentially a gothic one” (142) (Weinauer 85), and the image of America as “a city on a hill” displaces the darker aspects of its history. Authors of gothic texts address atrocities like “the decimation of indigenous peoples and the slave trade” (143)

(Weinauer 85), as well as “[American] culture’s dark, repressed, and oppositional elements” (Weinauer 85). Thus, gothic literature also serves as a vehicle for Poe and other authors to critique American exceptionalism. According to Weinauer, “the entire tradition of American gothic can be conceptualized as the attempt to invoke...the specter of Otherness that haunts the house of national narrative” (Savoy 13-14) (Weinauer 86). When Edgar Allan Poe published his first book of poetry, *Tamerlane, and Other Poems* in 1827, slavery had ended in the North and the United States was 34 years away from the start of the Civil War. In 1827, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was established, starting a new transition in American transportation and wealth. In some respects, gothic writers like Poe address darker aspects of American history than other writers. For example, Poe rejects the providential related literature so synonymous with the founding of America.

According to Dorothy Z. Baker in “America’s Gothic Fiction,” he writes in order to “give voice to the man who will not confess and the sailor whom God will not save, and Poe does so to establish ironic distance between the early eighteenth-century spiritual fictions of American belief and the nineteenth-century dark romantic fictions of the self” (Baker 39), providing a far darker approach than his contemporaries do. Since his tales almost always end without a defined resolution, they challenge the notion of American culture that citizens will serve as “saviors” among other nations and will succeed simply because they are American. Poe undermines publications dedicated to creating the American narrative that generations of people have subscribed to without question. According to Baker, “one might also see Poe’s attempt to undercut the narratives that establish national identity—such as those framed by Mather, one of the earliest, most prominent, and longstanding pillars of New England—as part of his rivalry with contemporary New England writers” (40). Furthermore, his own life provides an interesting

theory as to why he was determined to establish a separation between the American narrative and “the nineteenth-century dark romantic fictions of the self” (Baker 39).

According to John Engle in “Political Symbols and American Exceptionalism,” the “spirit of perverseness” Poe weaves in his stories deviates from the “national myth to which all citizens can ascribe” (Engle 324) that the “the city on a hill” was meant to be. For instance, Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) features “what had become familiar Gothic tropes (live burial, rotting corpses, madness, incarceration)” (Weinauer 89). The imagery in *Arthur Gordon Pym* centers on race relations, considering that Pym, towards the novel’s end, arrives in a land where every living thing is black while he is white. After the citizens of the island ambush him, Pym is unable to explain why they did so, conveying the limitation he has for understanding people different from himself, revealing the Puritans’ instinct to destroy the indigenous peoples whom they deemed as “savages,” since Pym’s fears will haunt him.

The short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” a narrator who remains unnamed decides to visit his long-lost friend, Roderick Usher, who lives in a home described as “a mansion of doom” (Poe 4) alongside his sister, Madeline. The narrator’s decision to “propose in [himself] a sojourn of some weeks” (Poe) despite acknowledging he “yet really knew little of [his] friend” (Poe) conveys his “ever-present sense of awe toward the Ushers” (Simmons 8), and his belief he can overcome every circumstance he will undergo in the house simply because he is American; however, he will ultimately pay for his conceit.

Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), meanwhile, represents the visceral haunting of past sins. The protagonist and narrator’s paranoia leads him to murder his neighbor, a man whose translucent blue eye haunts him and makes him believe he is surveilling his every movement. He is incapable of preventing himself from carrying out the murder, even referring to it as a

“success.” The narrator hides the murdered man’s remains underneath the floorboards, and believes he hears his heartbeat even after he is dead, which demonstrates just how tortured he is by his culpability for his sins. His fear of surveillance and the menacing “other” he believes his neighbor to be lead to his demise.

Additionally, the short story “The Black Cat” (1843) is another example of a narrator whose fear of surveillance leads him to commit murder, except he believes his once-beloved cat, Pluto, is watching his every movement when he falls into alcoholism. After he tortures and eventually kills Pluto, the narrator sees visions of the cat, in the form of an apparition on the wall and then in the physical form of another cat resembling him. The narrator’s tendency to engage in “perverseness” causes him to suffer, as he cannot reconcile his misdeeds for torturing and eventually killing his cat, disturbing occurrences resembling the United States’ inability to reconcile its original sins. Poe reveals the worst instincts and impulses of American citizens, stories that history would not wish to remember. Regardless of his own motivations or views for subverting American exceptionalism, he doubts its reliability for recounting American history. Poe captures the perverseness transforming the United States into a land that strays from the image of exceptionalism to which Americans were supposed to aspire.

I. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

Poe subverts the concept of American exceptionalism in the opening lines of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, specifically in rejecting the long-standing, imperialistic view that American explorers could conquer new lands without consequences from those they colonized and from fate itself. In the opening lines of the novel, Pym explains why he decided to publish his narrative despite his initial misgivings, citing the “society of several gentlemen in Richmond, Va., who felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited, and who were constantly urging it upon me, as a duty, to give my narrative to the public” (1). One reason he fears that his public duty will prove fruitless is that “the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvellous that, unsupported... (Except by the evidence of a single individual, and he a half-breed Indian)” they would be impossible to believe (1). This exemplifies his prejudices, a characteristic all too synonymous with imperialistic white American settlers. Pym also reflects “the American instinct to civilize, educate or otherwise dominate the world politically or economically” (Litke 10). Pym and his crew, while traveling to foreign lands, are the stereotypical definition of American explorers, who believe themselves entitled to whichever lands they wish to colonize; however, in Poe’s bleak world, their misdeeds lead to tragic consequences.

In the opening lines of the narrative, Pym details his “extraordinary series of adventure in the South Seas” (Poe), an opportunity he has which nearly does not come to fruition in several instances, according to his detailing of the tumultuous expeditions he experienced. Pym discloses that he “kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which [he] was absent” (Poe), and admittedly “feared [he] should not be able to write, from mere memory” due to “the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone” (Poe 1). Pym’s accounts reveal a journey

he and his friend, Augustus, undertake following an impulsive evening of sailing that invigorates Pym's desire to adventure on the high seas. His impulsiveness reveals his bias that as a white American frontiersman he is more than capable of surviving every possible hardship, no matter how calamitous. Throughout the novel Pym also reveals his prejudices against those who are different from him in appearance. Like the first settlers of the United States, he associates people's "dark skin with servility and native status with savagery" (Harvey). However, Pym soon realizes his imperialistic conquests are futile. Although he frequently refers to the people he meets by the color of their skin and believes them to be inferior "others," Pym actually becomes the savage he accuses the natives and crew members of being, considering his cannibalism and the other sins for which he must later repent.

In Chapter One, Pym describes how his desire to sail came to fruition, detailing his intimate relationship with his friend, Augustus, whose father was a sea captain (Poe). The duo becomes intoxicated and Pym agrees to accompany Augustus and "get up and dress, and go out on a frolic with the boat" (Poe). He later remarks, "[I] can hardly tell what possessed me, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought his mad idea one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world" (Poe). The spontaneous decision of the two young men to embark on their first boating journey while the wind "was blowing almost a gale, and the weather [being] very cold" (Poe), is an instance of their opinion that, as Americans, they are capable of surviving every possible predicament. Yet, Augustus and Pym must be rescued by a "large whaling ship, (the Penguin), bound to Nantucket" (Poe), since the two of them become unconscious as a result of the storm's effects. Pym describes the scene around him when he once again opens his eyes, stating that "Augustus, paler than death, was busily occupied in chafing my hands" (Poe) and expressing

“exclamations of gratitude and joy” (Poe). Their first failed expedition only encourages them, but it also foreshadows the trials ahead of them on their next sailing trip.

In spite of their harrowing ordeal, Pym still is eager to begin another sailing mission with Augustus, who soon proposes Pym join him and his father, Captain Barnard, aboard the *Grampus*, on another expedition. Pym admits that “it might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea” (Poe); however, he “never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance” (Poe). Just as Robert T. Tally, Jr. asserts in *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature: Satire, Fantasy, Critique*, the “apparently constant movement or migration [that were] part of the national self-image in the United States in the nineteenth century” (Tally) is subverted in this tale, since the protagonists’ mission to explore and eventually colonize ultimately fails. Pym’s enthusiasm embodies the “national self-image in the United States” (Tally) and expands upon the idea of America as a “city on a hill” (Litke 10), since he still wishes to travel elsewhere and explore new lands. He and Augustus believe they are entitled to discover and even colonize new lands even after Pym’s family voices their disapproval. Pym ventures to hide on the ship for three days, taking refuge in the lower deck without the captain and crew’s knowledge; the sole person aware of the “stowaway” is Augustus. Pym’s rebelliousness mirrors that of the free-spirited American as well, a characterization Poe creates in order to “puncture the national rhetoric itself, by playfully poking holes in it, [and] by making a mockery of these pretensions and aspirations” (Tally). Because, in fact, Pym and Augustus are fated for a venture that is not at all what they perceive it to be at its early stages.

Pym has no contact with Augustus for several days' time while below deck; therefore, he does not realize that a mutiny has occurred, which results in the injuries to and eventual killing of the captain and much of the crew. Since he has no understanding of what is occurring above deck, it deprives him of any knowledge he could have possessed about his new shipmates. He relies on "a small slip of what had the feeling of letter paper" (Poe) attached to his dog, Tiger's, neck, whose presence on the ship he realizes several days into his confinement. Unable to read the message in poor lighting, Pym "childishly tore it into pieces and [threw] it away, it was impossible to say where" (Poe), so he has no idea what is occurring above him. After an anxious period of yet another day, Pym is able to speak with Augustus again, who informs him that the ship was overtaken by its own crew in a mutiny when their journey first began, leading to "twenty-two perishing, and Augustus [giving] himself up for lost, expecting every moment his own turn to come next" (Poe).

Pym's inherent racism becomes obvious once he is informed about the mutiny. When Augustus leads him out of the lower deck to assess the damage above, Pym is preoccupied about the race of the "murderous party" (Poe), particularly when describing "the black cook" (Poe). According to Weinauer in "Race and the American Gothic," Pym "carefully delineates the racial identity of his shipmates" (90) by describing not the *cook*, but "the black cook" (Poe), whom he believes "in all respects [is] a perfect demon, and who seem[s] to exert as much influence, if not more, than the mate himself" (Poe). He spends little time describing the seven other crew members who overthrow the captain, emphasizing instead his belief that the black cook is capable of influencing the sailors. As Pym watches helplessly while the crew members continue to control the ship, he also tries to protect himself from becoming the "inferior other" he believes the cook is simply because of his skin color. Pym's racism internalizes the country's

original sin in disparaging the identities of people different in physical appearance, as he immediately perceives Native Americans and Black people as the most threatening “others” because of their differences.

Pym subscribes to the false conviction that he is invincible as a white American, and he manipulates the concept of “savagery” when referring to Native Americans and slaves, which conveniently “provided a foil for Europeans’ conceptions of themselves as ‘civilized’ and the justification for dispossession” (Harvey). Pym constantly deflects attention from himself throughout the story, instead preferring to remain preoccupied with documenting his differences from the natives and Black people he meets. He perceives them as less than human from the moment he sees their skin color, dismissing them as the inferior other. When Pym learns that the only member of the crew innocent of committing mutiny “was the son of an ‘Indian squaw of the tribe of Upsarokas” (Poe) [and] “his father was a fur-trader” (Poe), he is surprised. He refers to the first mate, named Dirk Peters, as “the less bloodthirsty of the party” (Poe), as well as “one of the most ferocious looking men I ever beheld” (Poe), rather than commending him for his scruples. Pym also refers to Peters as having hands that were “so enormously thick and broad” that they “hardly retain[ed] a human shape” (Poe), thus further “othering” him.

Pym further explains that Peters is “the main instrument in preserving the life of Augustus, and...I shall have frequent occasion to mention him hereafter in the course of my narrative” (Poe). However, Pym’s perception of Peters as “an instrument” signifies his view of him not as a noble first mate but as a tool to keep Augustus alive and to further their mission. Additionally, Pym’s remark illustrates the novel’s “obsession with race, which plays a role in many of its most horrifying moments” (Weinauer 89). Despite Pym’s inherent racism and his surprise that Peters is not as ferocious as he believes him to be, Pym, Augustus, and Peters form

an alliance in an attempt to reclaim the ship after the mutiny (Poe). They successfully overthrow the murderous crew members, each of whom is either killed or thrown overboard, aside from Richard Parker, who entreats them for mercy and promises to assist them in caring for the ship. The surviving crew experience a series of “what has become familiar Gothic tropes” (Weinauer 89), the first being “rotting corpses” (Weinauer 89): a Dutch ship, which they believe to be aiding them with needed provisions, passes their ship, and is actually full of dead sailors (Poe).

Before realizing that he is staring at their remains, Pym observes their skin tones, again transforming those different from him into a threatening “specter of Otherness” (Weinauer 86). He refers to one sailor as “a stout and tall man, with a very dark skin... [who was] smiling constantly so as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth” (Poe). Upon detecting “a smell, a stench, such as the whole world has no name for—no conception of—hellish—utterly suffocating—insufferable, inconceivable” (Poe), Pym and his fellow survivors come to the realization that the sailors are dead. After the shipmates discover the “insufferable, inconceivable” (Poe) reality of the crew’s remains, they soon realize their own proximity to death. While Pym labels people whom he is threatened by as “others,” he gradually engages in the very savagery he wrongfully assumes every person of color commits. He and Augustus are among the crew members who draw straws to determine which of them would act as human sacrifice when they no longer have sustenance available. Ultimately, Parker is the member chosen as their human sacrifice and is “stabbed in the back by Peters” (Poe). Pym recalls “the raging thirst which consumed [them] by the blood of the victim” (Poe), and after having “taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them together with the entrails, into the sea” (Poe), he remembers how they “devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days” (Poe). Ironically, Pym expresses how quickly he consumes the body of his fellow crew

member, whereas, on multiple prior occasions he had invoked the characterization of “otherness” toward people he believed were a threat. He fails to acknowledge that he has now become a savage instead.

After their desperate consumption of Parker, Pym and Peters become the only surviving members of *The Grampus* after Augustus dies from the injuries he sustained from the crew’s insurrection. Even worse than Augustus’ death is the fact that sharks devour his body. Pym recounts how “the glare of phosphoric light with which it was surrounded plainly discovered...seven or eight land sharks, the clashing of whose horrible teeth, as their prey was torn to pieces among them” (Poe). The constant torrent of tragic events now affecting Pym is a stark contrast to that first impulsive sailing trip when Pym said he had “never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after [their] miraculous deliverance” (Poe). Pym’s conviction that he and Augustus will survive every circumstance simply because they are American is consistently proved wrong, and Pym grows closer to becoming “the other” himself.

Pym and Peters have little choice after Augustus’ death except to find refuge on another ship. Their opportunity arrives when the *Jane Guy* sails near them. They make every effort to ensure that the crew sees them, and “[begin] instantly to make every signal in [their] power...leaping as high as [their] weak condition would permit” (Poe). Pym declares it would have been “an act of fiendish barbarity” (Poe) if the crew left them to die. However, the crew does shelter Pym and Peters, and together, they discover a new land with solely black inhabitants. This realization is jarring for Pym, whose racist observations of Peters and his conviction he is superior to “savages” point to his prejudices. Pym, though, has no idea whatsoever that when he, Peters,

and their new crew members meet the natives he will become the inferior “other” he believes people of color to be, and he will be transformed into the conquered rather than the conqueror.

The inhabitants of the island initially befriend the newcomers. Their chief, Too-wit, leads the crew on a tour of the island, during which he and Captain Guy agree that the crew will remain for one week to gather sea cucumber. Pym remarks that they “saw no disposition to thievery among them, nor did [they] miss a single article after their departure” (Poe), conveying his prejudice that they are more likely to be thieves because of their skin color. He also reverts to his previous disparaging language when referring to the natives as “a hundred and ten savages” (Poe), never thinking for a moment they will become the colonizers and he as well as the rest of the crew will become “the colonized.”

Gradually, Pym and Peters become “the other,” the first instance being when they narrowly manage to avoid death at the hands of the natives. He and Peters are en route to a dinner with the natives they believe are their new allies when Pym’s curiosity about a geological phenomenon saves them from the sudden “partial rupture of the soil that had been brought about” (Poe), which immediately buries their crew alive. Pym ominously concludes that he and Peters “were the only living white men upon the island” (Poe); a statement contradicting Pym’s previous statements of Peters being a savage. Now, he considers the two of them the two survivors who watch helplessly while “the whole country around [them] seemed to be swarming with savages...doubtless with a view of lending their aid in the capture and plunder of the Jane” (Poe). Immediately, this role reversal “savages that imaginary America by means of a satirical, fantastic, and critical approach” (Tally). Pym’s hopes of exploring and then colonizing the new land, like the Puritans who created “the city on a hill,” cannot come to fruition. Pym now has experienced bitter consequences for exercising his “specter of Otherness” (Weinauer 86).

For several weeks the men remain in their hidden location on the hill before they attempt to escape, meticulously planning how to ambush the natives, whom Pym still refers to as “savages” (Poe). The captors nearly quell their efforts when they notice Pym and Peters, and cause Peters to fall “to the ground with a blow from a club” (Poe); however, they are still successful in ambushing the natives and manage to kill all of them aside from one (Poe). Pym and Peters secure Nu-nu as their captive, “overtaking him...before he had advanced many paces, and were about to put him to death, when Peters suggested that [they] might derive some benefit from forcing him to accompany [them] in [their] attempt at escape” (Poe). Along with their captive, whose name they learn is Nu-Nu, Pym and Peter quickly escape on a canoe taken from the natives. They cannot escape from their state of terror in Tsalal, though. When they reach the South Pole, “one of the white animals whose appearance upon the beach at Tsalal had occasioned so wild a commotion among the savages” (Poe) appears, and “the heat of the water increased, and the hand could no longer be endured within it” (Poe).

The novel’s “obsession with race” (Weinauer) returns to haunt Pym, whose preoccupation with otherness leads him to suffer grave consequences. Pym and Peters, once again the only survivors, watch defenselessly as “white ashy material fell now continually around [them] and in vast quantities” (Poe). Nu-Nu, in witnessing the white atmosphere nearly consume himself and his captors, dies of fear, an occurrence symbolizing the terror of slavery and colonialism in America. Pym and Peters, though, do not escape unscathed, either mentally or physically. Pym’s recounting ends abruptly with the sudden appearance of a “shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men and the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow” (Poe). Ironically, Pym’s misdeeds against people of color as well as his

false conviction that as a white American he will remain unharmed against every circumstance, return to haunt him with the appearance of the white apparition.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym is a response to the quintessential American narrative story, “subverting both the actually existing customs and practices of nineteenth-century American life and the ideological foundations of what will become the field of American literary studies of the twentieth century and beyond” (Tally). The novel counters the nationalistic tendencies of the American literary tradition as well as American society. Pym’s and Augustus’ sense of entitlement leads to their demise in the bleak world they fail to colonize. However, Pym’s decision to publish the book after hearing the encouragement of gentlemen in West Virginia mirrors his imperialistic, power-hungry perspective, adopted from the colonists’ demonization of indigenous and Black people as they founded their “city on a hill.” Poe’s title character is revealed to have been fated for death from an accident at the conclusion of the novel, while Peters is believed to be alive in Illinois. He “cannot be met with at present,” but “will, no doubt, afford material for a conclusion of Mr. Pym’s account” (Poe). The story’s ominous ending “imagines a post-American world system in which the nation was no longer the dominant or organizing cultural force” (Tally). It also negates the belief that the United States can successfully repress the darkest moments in its history.

II. “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Another Poe story also conveys his deviation from the American exceptionalism that other authors in his era emphasize. “The Fall of the House of Usher” gives readers an idea of what could be happening behind their neighbors’ closed doors, and how they might not be fulfilling expectations of the United States’ image as an exceptional nation. The tale’s unnamed narrator details his observations about twins Roderick and Madeline Usher while staying in the House of Usher for two weeks. He suggests they are living in sin, with the admission “that the stem of the

Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain” (Poe 5). The narrator, though, abandons his sense of self the moment he first arrives at the House of Usher, believing he is capable of overcoming any obstacles during his “two week’s sojourn” (Poe). His determination to stay inside the home, despite observing its formidable exterior when he first arrives, as well as possessing little knowledge of his former friend aside from his family’s supposed inter-marrying, demonstrate his internalized American exceptionalism. The narrator believes he is exempt from the potential dangers that the gothic homestead exhibits in its very walls because of his desire to act as savior to his long-lost friend and the Usher line, a tendency synonymous with the American identity.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” begins with the narrator, who remains unnamed, arriving at the home of his long-lost friend, Roderick. He describes feeling “a sense of insufferable gloom” (Poe 2) when he “first glimpses the building” (Poe 2), yet he does not run in the opposite direction; instead, he observes the dwelling from his horse. The narrator lacks much knowledge about his hosts, but he is aware of their “acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed [Roderick]” (Poe 2) and an “incurable malady possessing Madeline” (Poe 6), along with the single family line existing for generations. He describes the Usher race’s “entire family laying in the direct line of descent” (Poe 3) as a “deficiency,” (Poe 3), alluding to the cause of the descendants’ disease. The siblings descend from generations of inbred Ushers, and despite their shared ancestry, the narrator also alludes to their sexual relationship. Yet the narrator expresses “an ever-present sense of awe toward the Ushers, in spite, or perhaps because of their aura of fading decadence and the horrors with which they live” (Simmons 8). In other words, his fascination with the unknowns of the Usher family entices him to stay in the home, as it provides unlimited observation of their

mysterious world. The narrator admits his experiment is “somewhat childish” (Poe 3), but he is also aware it involves a family of great wealth, disclosing that the Ushers have lived in this estate for generations, musing that they have married those “perhaps of collateral issue” (Poe 3). His abandonment of conventionality not only satisfies his friend’s request for companionship but also the narrator’s own need to relieve his curiosity regarding a world about which he knows nothing.

Upon his arrival at the House of Usher, the narrator describes feeling “a shudder even more thrilling than before...” (Poe) as he “reined [his] horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down” (Poe). He by no means is considering his departure from the House of Usher; rather, he is intrigued by that which is unknown to him, to “make his sojourn” (Poe) in a domain where he can serve as a passive observer. His inability to explain the feelings and sensations he experiences while within or in the vicinity of the House of Usher indicates his fascination with that which is unknown to him. Simultaneously, he fears and is fascinated by the world the “boon companion [of] his boyhood” (Poe), Roderick, lives in with his sister, Madeline. He observes from horseback the exterior of the “mansion of gloom” and remarks about the “minute fungi overspread[ing] the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves” (Poe 4), “the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling,” and “the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant eye-like windows” (Poe 3). Despite its foreboding architecture, the narrator remains undeterred in his mission to stay at the House of Usher, despite its foreboding architecture.

From the moment he enters the formidable dwelling, the narrator shares with his readers a world they would not have known otherwise. By entering a world completely unlike his own, the narrator also exploits the lives of the Ushers, as he discloses his observations during his visit with them. Although Poe never discloses whether the narrator or the Ushers are American, the narrator

possesses attributes of the “colonizer” attitude of American explorers throughout history. As he immerses himself into a world about which he knows nothing, the narrator embodies America’s “mission to civilize, educate or otherwise dominate the world politically or economically” (Litke 10). His overconfidence and desire to infiltrate a place that is not his even after Roderick’s sister, Madeline, dies, resembles that of an American conquering unknown land. However, he will face consequences for trying to behave as a savior who thinks himself capable of intervening in someone else’s life.

As “The Fall of the House of Usher” progresses, the gothic elements of the story become more obvious, with its “gloomy and decaying houses and setting, mysterious events, supernatural hints, an ambiguous protagonist, a suffering female and an atmosphere of terror” (Perry, Sederholm). The narrator describes how “a valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted [him], in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master” (Poe). The narrator does not falter from his task at hand, though. Instead, his “sensation of stupor” (Simmons 8) causes him to forsake an awareness of his surroundings and just how precarious the situation truly is. Furthermore, as Simmons continues in *American Horror Fiction and Class*, “the unnamed narrator possesses the reader also as we read on, eagerly awaiting the culmination of the ‘ghastly and inappropriate splendor’ that permeates the tale” (Simmons 8). Readers rely on the narrator to share with them the lives of the exploited people, who thus become “the colonized.” The narrator also remarks that he “felt that [he] breathed an atmosphere of sorrow” (Poe) the moment he walks into “a very large and lofty room” where he finds Roderick (Poe); however, he still has a conviction that he will successfully overcome every difficulty that awaits him.

Additionally, the short story “The Black Cat” (1843) is another example of a narrator whose fear of surveillance leads him to commit murder, except he believes his once-beloved cat, Pluto,

is watching his every movement when he falls into alcoholism. After he tortures and eventually kills Pluto, the narrator sees visions of the cat, in the form of an apparition on the wall and then in the physical form of another cat resembling him. The narrator's tendency to engage in "perverseness" causes him to suffer, as he cannot reconcile his misdeeds for torturing and eventually killing his cat, disturbing occurrences resembling the United States' inability to reconcile its original sins. Poe reveals the worst instincts and impulses of American citizens, stories that history would not wish to remember. Regardless of his own motivations or views for subverting American exceptionalism, he doubts its reliability for recounting American history. Poe captures the perverseness that, if revealed, could transform the United States into a land tainted by people's demons, straying away from the image of nationalism Americans were supposed to project in society.

Aside from his belief that he will survive unknown circumstances, the narrator frequently demonstrates his belief that he is a "savior" to Roderick. His role as savior is an image that has been synonymous with long-held American ideals. Roderick, meanwhile, resembles the role of the indigenous person whom the Puritan settlers created for the original Americans, considering how the narrator easily inserts himself into a home that is not his and he believes he can rescue his friend from his precarious circumstances, which Roderick has clearly been incapable of doing for himself. The narrator confesses that his stay at the House of Usher is a "somewhat childish experiment" he engaged in "to deepen the first singular impression [of the house]" (Poe 5). As John Engle in "Political Symbols and American Exceptionalism" emphasizes, "Indeed, in the American political sphere, perceived foreignness is a useful shorthand to paint someone as un-American, anti-republican, generally untrustworthiness" (326). The narrator, then, like the settlers who stepped onto North American soil to create another version of England, acts as an explorer

who is observing land already belonging to someone else, and clearly demonstrates his conceit when he admits his visit with a friend about whose lifestyle he always had reservations is only to satisfy an experiment.

In addition, when he actually enters the home, the narrator notices the pitiable condition of his host, remarking about “the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies” (Poe 7). The narrator expresses “a feeling half of pity, half of awe” (Poe) upon seeing Roderick’s pallor when they sit down to converse. He then proceeds to assist him in the most intimate of tasks during his visit. Roderick continues to seek the narrator’s companionship, and describes him as “his best, and only, personal friend” (Poe 3), despite their lack of correspondence for an extended period of time. He tells the narrator that he relies upon him for “some alleviation of his malady by the cheerfulness of [his] society” (Poe 3). The narrator, though, views his sojourn as an excursion. He carefully describes “the character of [Roderick’s] face” (Poe), as if he were describing a scientific curiosity, informing readers that Roderick possesses “a cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid and luminous beyond comparison” (Poe 5). The narrator also describes Roderick’s “voice [as] varying rapidly from a tremulous indecision...to that species of energetic concision” (Poe 5). Roderick appears differently from the narrator, making him the foreign “other” that leads him to write detailed observations about his findings while on his visit.

Another member of the House of Usher is Roderick’s twin sister, Madeline, who never engages in conversation with the newcomer and her brother, but nevertheless still appears at various times throughout the house. While Roderick laments to his confidant that “her decease would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers” (Poe 6), Madeline herself “passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and without having

noticed [the narrator's] presence, disappeared" (Poe 6). The narrator watches while seated with Roderick, her brother and presumed lover, as Madeline closes the door behind her in the adjoining hallway. The narrator searches for Roderick's reaction, —"but he had buried his face in his hands, and [the narrator] could only perceive that a more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears" (Poe 6). In fact, it is soon revealed that "the disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians" (Poe 6), further explaining her peculiar behavior and appearance. The American captivation with "the other" in "The Fall of the House of Usher" takes the form of this pair of siblings, whose sinfulness has taken place behind the security of a fortress.

The narrator observes the peculiar dynamic between the siblings, recalling Roderick's admission that Madeline has been his "sole companion for so many long years, [his] last and only relative on Earth" (Poe). Upon learning of their decision to remain together all of their lives, which the narrator admits suspecting prior to his arrival, he does not abandon his mission to comfort his long-lost friend, Roderick, in his need of companionship. Rather, he simply continues living in the house, watching the two of them carry out their routines. In fact, it should be noted that "in none of the nineteenth-century commentary on 'The Fall of the House of Usher'...and in none of our own period, is there a feeling of shock, or even of surprise, that Roderick is in love with his sister" (Foster and Sutton 1). The narrator's fascination with class and aristocracy, as well as his curiosity about the siblings, lead him to excuse the unnatural eccentricities occurring behind the closed doors of the House of Usher.

The narrator ultimately reveals both his belief that he is Roderick's savior and his fascination with the unknown when he assists Roderick in entombing Madeline after she dies. He obliges his host with the troubling task of hastily burying his sister and sole, lifelong companion.

Rather than expressing dismay about it, he describes the space where she will be entombed, mentioning that “it had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjonkeep” (Poe 10). Again, his willingness to assist Roderick amounts less to his spirit of benevolence and far more to his attraction to “the other” (Perry, Sederholm 15). However, his and Roderick’s attempts to entomb Madeline are in vain. The narrator becomes unsettled in the evenings when he tries to sleep, as he detects a disturbance in the home he cannot identify. Despite his inability “to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me” (Poe 19), the narrator remains in his friend’s home until the mysterious sounds become more obvious to him.

Outside of the mansion, a mighty storm takes place one night, and in an attempt to calm Roderick’s nerves, as well as his own, the narrator insists he read him the only book he has at his disposal, “The Mad Trist” of Sir Launcelot Canning. While reading to his host, the narrator notices “a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound” (Poe 22-23). Roderick does not jump to his feet in fear like the narrator; instead, he appears transfixed in his seat. The narrator watches helplessly while Roderick’s face erupts into “a sickly smile” (Poe 23), and he speaks “in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of [his] presence” (Poe 23). He is aware that his sister will return to the room where they are hiding and knows he can do nothing except to wait for her to murder him.

Moments after Roderick admits his belief that Madeline was alive when they buried her, she arrives, with “blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame” (Poe 24). In the moment that “[Madeline] fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse” (Poe), the Ushers’ line of descent immediately ended. Following their demise, the narrator watches helplessly after running outside of the House of Usher as the

“mighty walls” of the fortress he remained at for several weeks “burst upon [his] sight—[his] brain reeling as [he] sees the mighty walls rushing asunder” (Poe).

Both the inhabitants and the physical House of Usher fall to their demise. The bloodline of the Ushers, as the narrator reveals, is tainted because each descendant engaged in incestuous relations with another. The narrator’s willingness to abandon his sense of self in order to immerse himself into a world he knows nothing about, both despite and because of its oddities, speaks further to his internalized American beliefs such as acting as a savior to the Ushers and a colonizer entitled to explore the unknown. According to David Simmons in *American Horror Fiction and Class: From Poe to Twilight*, “it is only with the story’s horrific denouncement, Madeline’s ‘attack’ on Roderick...that the narrator and the reader are released from the grip of the Ushers to return to the normalcy of their presumably middle class, orthodox lifestyles” (Simmons 8). Ultimately, the narrator can never retain the exceptionalism he believes will allow him to overcome every obstacle; instead, he must escape the house that destructs everyone in its path.

III. “*The Tell-Tale Heart*” and “*The Black Cat*”

Poe’s classic short stories, “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat,” continue his critique of the ideal of American exceptionalism. They actually represent the paranoia and fear that are the United States’ worst instincts. The paranoid, tormented narrators of both tales commit horrific crimes against their innocent targets as a result of how much they fear them, and they are haunted by their crimes until they are discovered. Both stories lampoon the “city on a hill” image of the United States, in acknowledgement of the fact that Americans have often committed atrocities because of their fear of and paranoia about those different from them.

The narrator of “The Black Cat” attempts to convince his audience that he is perfectly sane; however, he immediately shows signs of madness. He asserts frequently that “mad [he is] not” (Poe 1), which only reinforces the perception that he is mentally ill. The narrator explains that he is writing the narrative in order to “unburden [his] soul” (Poe 1) because “tomorrow [he] dies” (Poe 1). He confesses to his readers that the “household events” (Poe 1) he recalls “have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed [him]” (Poe 1), in order to separate himself from the severity of the crimes he has committed. The narrator, who remains unnamed, claims he was always fond of all animals (Poe), and his wife, like his parents, “lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind” (Poe 2). He explains that they “had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a *cat*” (Poe 2). Notably, the narrator italicizes the word “cat” to signify how the cat, named Pluto, altered his life forever.

After several years, the narrator notes how he is suddenly “more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others” (Poe 4), and “suffered [himself] to use intemperate language to [his] wife” (Poe 4). He blames the cat for the change in his state of mind, saying that while their “friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years,” over time [his] general temperament and character... experienced a radical alteration for the worse” (Poe 4). Gradually, he becomes more tortured by “the fury of a demon that instantly possessed [him]” (Poe 5), lamenting his “original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from [his] body” (Poe 5).

His tortured mind leads him to torment his pets, and, at first, he spares his most beloved cat, Pluto. However, the narrator becomes enraged when Pluto recoils after the unnamed narrator arrives home intoxicated one evening. Believing the cat is avoiding his presence, the narrator “seize[s] him; when, in his fright at [his] violence, he inflict[s] a slight wound upon [his] hand with his teeth” (Poe 6). He then tortures Pluto, the one creature on Earth he claims he most

loves, “[taking] from [his] waistcoat-pocket a penknife, [he] opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket” (Poe 6). Rather than killing him immediately, the narrator forces the cat to suffer, convinced that by removing his eye, he will no longer watch him while he falls further into alcoholism and accepts his desires for perverseness.

When he tortures Pluto, he expresses “the bitterest remorse” (Poe 6), yet he continually ties his sinful acts to “[his] final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of perverseness” (Poe 5). He fails to prevent himself from torturing Pluto; his first violent act results in cutting his eye out of its socket. The narrator “slips a noose about its neck and hangs it to the limb of the tree” (Poe 6), except he hangs the cat “with tears streaming from [his] eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at [his] heart” (Poe 6). During the same night, his house catches fire. When he and his wife return to what remains of their home, they notice a disturbing finding, which is an image of a massive cat with a rope around its neck. He later finds another cat while walking late one night, and it oddly resembles Pluto, the cat he murdered, as it even has just one eye, its one difference being “a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast” (Poe 8). He soon feels an “absolute *dread* of the beast” (Poe 9), just as he did with Pluto, when he notices how attached the cat is to him, and this dread eventually metastasizes into a desire to kill him.

On one fateful occasion, the narrator strikes the cat with an axe, and, in realizing his wife’s horror and her attempt to prevent him from murdering him, he “withdrew [his] arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain” (Poe 11), killing her with the same object he intended to kill their new cat with. His desire to engage in sinful acts or “the perverse” ultimately leads him to murder his wife. After considering several brutal options about how to dispose of his wife’s remains, including “cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by

fire” (Poe 11), the narrator ultimately decides to hide her body in the walls of the cellar where he killed her. He grows relieved in realizing his wife as well as the cat are gone, as he now has no one to watch as he falls into perverseness.

His sense of tranquility is short-lived, because “on the fourth day of the assassination, a party of police came” (Poe 14) after neighbors inquire. He leads them on a tour to prove his innocence, which only validates the neighbors’ suspicions. Yet his effusive explanations are in vain during this tour. While attempting to convince them that the house was “an *excellently* well-constructed house” (Poe 14), he pounds on the wall with a cane, and he hears a muffled cry that he believes is his wife, somehow still alive. It is not his wife, though, as the cat was walled up with his wife in the tomb and is screeching. It sits upon his wife’s decaying body, “with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire” (Poe 14), taunting the narrator who became drawn to murder because of his desire to engage in a perverse, evil act. The intervention of the police forces the narrator to confront his misdeeds and his performance of innocence must end.

As Brett Zimmerman observes in *Edgar Allan Poe: Rhetoric and Style*, “the protagonists of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ and ‘The Black Cat,’ have a considerable grasp of the techniques of argument but...they fail in their rhetorical performance even while striving desperately to convince” (Zimmerman 28). In the case of “The Black Cat,” the narrator must try to convince his audience that his cat, Pluto, drove him to commit the perverse act of torturing and eventually killing him. Instead, the narrator demonstrates how paranoid he truly is, considering he believes Pluto, the pet he at one time favored above all of his others, is watching him. Additionally, the narrator’s failure to justify his actions ties to “the author, Poe, put[ting] various rhetorical figures of speech and thought, and argumentative appeals, into his narrators’ explanations of the horrible events they have witnessed, then sit[ting] back with his perceptive readers to watch the narrators

fall short in their attempts at persuasion” (Zimmerman 28). The narrator of “The Black Cat” attempts to detach himself from his culpability, as he searches for a reason why he murdered his wife and cat in the first place.

His first act of blinding the cat in one eye is significant, considering his decision to slowly torture his cat rather than kill him immediately. The first American settlers believed they must eliminate the Native Americans, witnesses to their crimes, and they do not kill them immediately, but like the narrator of “The Black Cat,” they torture them slowly, giving them disease from blankets and disparaging their culture by forcing their conversion. Many settlers were convinced that “despite material and spiritual exchange between Indians and settlers...Indians were inherently savage” (Harvey 12). In order to justify their mistreatment of Native Americans, settlers negated their existence, insisting they should be dismissed as “savages” who could never be educated or converted. Yet, the settlers perceived the indigenous peoples as the threatening “other” who received their mistreatment and threatened their attempts to colonize the land Native Americans already lived on. Like the narrator of “The Black Cat,” they believe they have no other choice except to eliminate the individuals who are aware of their evil deeds, but their sins still haunt them forever.

The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” also is under the impression that he must eliminate someone in order to prevent him from surveilling him. Yet, like the Puritans and the narrator of “The Black Cat,” his sins will continue to haunt him, and he would be led to commit even graver sins. In the opening lines of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator admits that he has “been ill, very ill,” (Poe 64), yet he denies that he is insane, asking his readers, “But why do you say that I have lost control of my mind, why do you say that I am mad? Can you not see that I have full control of my mind?” (Poe 64). The narrator, a young man, explains how he is haunted by the eye of his

elderly neighbor, confessing that he “did not hate the old man; [he] even loved him,” nor “had never hurt [him]...or not want his money.” (Poe 64) Rather, he believed he desired to kill him because of “his eye, [as it] was like the eye of a vulture, the eye of one of those terrible birds that watch and wait while an animal dies, and then fall upon the dead body and pull it to pieces to eat it” (Poe 64). The narrator confesses that the man’s translucent eye threatens him, and he believes he has no other alternative than to kill him, as that would ensure he could “close that eye forever” (Poe 64). He plots his neighbor’s murder, arriving “every night about twelve o’clock” (Poe 64) and “every morning...to his room, and with a warm, friendly voice [asking] him how he had slept” (Poe 64). Although the narrator describes himself as gaining more powerful senses that he did not have previously, he actually suffers from paranoia, believing the mere existence of his neighbor’s eye threatens his own life. He explains that “never before had [he] felt so strongly [his] own power; [he] was now sure of success” (Poe 65), and frequently refers to his fantasy of murdering his neighbor as what would be his “success.” The narrator’s dream of murdering his aging neighbor completely occupies his mind, and he decides one fateful night to carry out the evil deed.

He watches one late evening as the innocent man sleeps, expressing pleasure to witness the man awaken in the darkness while being unable to see who stares at him. The narrator “continue[s] to push the door, slowly, softly, [and] put[s] in [his head]...put[s] in [his] hand, with the covered light” (Poe 65). He recognizes that the defenseless, elderly man “was sitting up in his bed, filled with fear” and states, “I knew that he knew I was there...He felt me there. Now he knew that Death was standing there” (Poe 65), capitalizing “death” so that he can credit himself with killing the man and his translucent eye as well as to portray himself as the Grim Reaper. Soon after the narrator commits the murder, during which he yells, ‘Die! Die!’ (66), he

acknowledges the man's "heart was beating; but [he] smiled as [he] felt that success was near" (66), again referring to his fateful act as "success." He then attempts to convince his readers that he is sane by describing the meticulous care he took to "cut off the head, then the arms, and then the legs" (Poe 66) and then "to put the body where no one could find it" (Poe 66), as he hides it beneath the floorboards.

Of course, his efforts to hide his crime are in vain, considering it haunts him until he confesses his culpability. When the police arrive to the man's home after the murder in response to "one of the neighbors [hearing] the old man's cry" (Poe 67), the narrator wishes to protect his success, "as if playing a game with them, [he] asked them to sit down and talk for awhile" (Poe 67). However, the tortured narrator soon hears the sound of his neighbor's beating heart, explaining, "Suddenly, I knew that the sound was not in my ears, it was not just inside my head...And the sound, too, became louder" (Poe 67). The narrator is no longer able to protect his secret or celebrate his "success" in the perverse manner he did while committing the murder. Instead, he "could bear it no longer [and] pointed at the boards and cried, 'Yes! Yes, I killed him. Pull up the boards and you shall see! I killed him. But why does his heart not stop beating?! Why does it not stop!?' " (Poe 67). The narrator of "Tell-Tale Heart" at the end of the tale is tortured no longer by his elderly neighbor's eye, but instead by his "success" in carrying out the gruesome murder and the heartbeat he still hears in his mind.

The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" cannot find relief from the eye that tortures him so deeply, even after he ensures that it will "close forever" (Poe 64) once he kills his elderly neighbor. On the contrary, the eye haunts him even more severely after the old man's death, considering the fact he must take blame for his crimes and how he hears a heartbeat until he informs police. The heartbeat serves as a visceral response to the way in which his act of murder

haunts him, and will continue to haunt him until he can face the consequences. It is compelling to consider why the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart” was driven to murder his innocent, elderly neighbor simply because of his difference in appearance. The narrator becomes preoccupied with his fear that the man is living and breathing, as if he were threatening him simply by existing. As Jarkko Toikkanen suggests in “Auditory Images in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’ “certain themes and narrative patterns within the story have grasped the readers’ attention, such as the foreboding ‘evil eye’ figure, appearing as the catalyst of the narrator’s madness, and his potential unreliability as the teller of his own story” (Toikkanen 1). Furthermore, the narrator views his elderly neighbor’s eye as a source of constant surveillance, which will lead to his death if he does not kill him first. Despite his desire to live freely without the belief that he is constantly being watched by a menacing gaze, it is the narrator’s paranoia about an innocent man with appearances different from his own that will lead him to his bleak demise.

Both of the narrators’ heinous acts torture them relentlessly. The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” hears a heartbeat after he murders his neighbor, leading to his demise until he confesses his evil deed to authorities. The narrator of “The Black Cat,” meanwhile, feels haunted by his black cat, Pluto, both in an apparition on his wall and in the physical form of another cat. The manner in which the protagonists feel haunted by their past misdeeds represents the inability of the United States to move past its dark history without acknowledging or attempting to amend it. One of the darkest elements of its history, according to Ellen Weinauer, has been “violent clashes between and among Anglo colonists and Native American communities, whether in the form of local skirmishes or prolonged warfare,” which only served to “provoke efforts to explain a world of profound uncertainty and upheaval and to justify the dispossession and extermination of native peoples in the name of Puritanism (and later, democracy)” (Weinauer

86). Thus, the paranoia and fears of America's first settlers, which continues in the subsequent generations of Americans, are explored by Poe in these two narrators and their perilous stories.

The ominous threat both narrators feel against innocent people and animals is juxtaposed with the past actions of the United States. Although they suffer from mental illnesses, the narrators' preoccupation with the mere existence of living things that are different from them is a representation of America's dark history. The narrators of the two tales suffer from "an anxiety [called] 'the secular imaginary,' an intricate and widely shared set of epistemological assumptions that 'defies logic, particularly its own'" (McGann 650). Their anxieties about being watched by a threatening "other" resembles the repeated collective attitude of the United States regarding those who are different from them. In other words, the United States could not achieve its vision of a "city on a hill" because of the mistakes it never reconciled. Since the main motivation in founding the United States had been to create a "city on a hill," where Pilgrims could freely practice their religion, the newcomers never consider their culpability since they are living what they believe is God's mission for them, and they think it is necessary to expel the indigenous peoples who owned the land they say God has given to them.

All four Poe tales symbolize the sins that the United States will never escape from. The first American settlers while founding their "city on a hill" could not distinguish their murderous acts against indigenous peoples as sinful, since they believed they were entitled to the land already belonging to indigenous peoples. The darkest elements of American history become visceral reactions and disturbing images in the stories that represent the lasting memory of its misdeeds. The sense of haunting in all four narrators represents "the vengeful psychic return of the repressed truths of the American experience" (Weinauer 85). The tales are evidence that "that so-called classic American literature is haunted, and that the haunting of [American]

cultural works has never ceased” (McGann 650). Poe’s tales today serve to question the concept of “the city on a hill.” He demonstrates how the United States’ past misdeeds against indigenous peoples and people of color can detract from its image of being exceptional among other nations. Through his use of protagonists who believe themselves capable of overcoming every obstacle, Poe demonstrates how they must pay for their sins at the conclusions of the tales with their failures to accomplish their missions. In every circumstance, the protagonists are tortured for their errors, just as the image of an exceptional America has become bleaker with any reexamination of history.

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