

# **Significance of Symbolism in Edgar Allan Poe's selected works**

Shegufta Rahman

Student ID: 09103001

Department of English and Humanities

December 2015



# **Significance of Symbolism in Edgar Allan Poe's selected works**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of English and Humanities

Of

BRAC University

By

Shegufta Rahman

Student ID: 09103001

Supervised by

Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam

Professor

Department of English and Humanities

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

December 2015

## **Acknowledgements**

It has been a long journey and finally I am here with my completed dissertation. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for my well-wishers for their support and encouragement throughout the whole process.

First of all I would like to thank the Almighty Allah, You have blessed and guided me and made it possible to bring this thesis to a timely conclusion.

I would like to express my earnest appreciation and gratitude to my thesis supervisor Professor, Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam for your helpful approach in guiding me with my thesis.

My special thanks to all the members of the BRACU ENH-faculty- Professor Firdous Azim, Rukhsana Rahim Chowdhury, Sabreena Ahmed, and all others who have guided me during the years of my undergraduate study.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincerest gratitude to my family for your love, support and understanding from the beginning till the very end of my thesis, for always keeping my spirit high and believing in me.

# Contents

Abstract	V
Chapter 1- Introduction	01
Chapter 2- Notion of Symbolism and its Theories	05
Chapter 3- Poe's Short Stories and Symbolism	12
Chapter 4- Poe's Poems and Symbolism	24
Chapter 5- Conclusion	32

## **Abstract**

Romantics emerged through creating a new wave in literature. They were more concerned about the expression of feelings than reason. They found the classics somewhere stagnant at a particular point from where human passion and their elementary feelings are distant; sometimes absent. So, they focused specially on the subjects of man, love and nature in their writing. Romanticism has originated from the English literature. The English romantic poets Coleridge, Wordsworth and also German romantic philosophy shaped the way of American Romanticism. Individuality, personal freedom, presence of supernatural, celebration of simplicity, examination of the poet's inner feelings- these had become the major traits of English Romanticism. Gradually, it has spread its influence on American literature too. Authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman started to walk on the same road. They have preferred to write what they felt to write instead of only following their ancestors. As a result, a new genre has come out. Readers have got a new diversion of thinking process; their interpretations have got diversified paths. Among the American Romantics, Edgar Allan Poe is one of them. He has written not only about pure love, but also strongly focused the negativities of human life which are cannot be erased easily. Besides, having a tragic life of his own, Poe's writings got the vive of escapism, loss of love and horror and death. He has found that only death carries meaning of real truth as human beings are prone to face hardship in their lives. Such beliefs produced the works of 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Tell-Tale Heart', 'The Black Cat', 'The Raven', 'Annabel Lee' etc. In his works like 'The Raven' and 'Annabel Lee', we see that the heartache of a lover after the loss of his beloved keeps him in the trauma and the lover remains unable to get rid of his memory line. His dark and gloomy setting in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and

'The Black Cat' have haunted his readers. Thus he has established scary feelings in readers' mind and also has made himself as a prominent gothic writer in the American literature. His main tool in creating such intense is the vast use of symbolism in his works. My focus of this paper is the significance of Poe's use of symbolism in his selected works- 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Black Cat', 'The Raven' and 'Annabel Lee'.

The method which is followed in this work is descriptive and analytic, illustrating symbolism and discussing its use in the selected literary works.

In order to make this dissertation conventional and well organized, the framework is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is a general introduction of literature, the author, gothic style and the period of romanticism. The second chapter focuses on symbolism, providing a set of theories: Whitehead (1927), Freud (2003), De Saussure (2009) etc. The third chapter is concerned with the literary analysis of symbolism used in Poe's selected short stories. The fourth chapter is about the analysis of symbols used in Poe's selected poems. And last but not the least; the fifth chapter is a conclusion of my dissertation where an overall brief discussion is given.

## Chapter-1

### Introduction

Literature reflects life. It is often marked as the mirror of society. An image of the society is drawn to put certain phenomena or a specific dilemma is resolved through literature.

The language and style of any literary work projects the author's own messages; each of them has his specific way to deliver his message for what he uses different figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, symbolism, irony....etc. Different selections of figure of speech distinguish them from one to another. By doing so, the author fulfills his motives in that piece of literary work. Most of the times, the motives are to create pleasure reaching beyond the ordinary regulations of language.

Among American writers Edgar Allan Poe is considered as one of the greatest. For him symbolism is the ultimate tool to speak a lot of things without speaking a real language. He uses loads of symbols almost in all of his works especially in 'The Tell Tale Heart', 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Black Cat', 'Annabel Lee', 'The Raven'...etc. He is regarded as a major influence on American literature because of his own works as well as for his literary criticism. Despite his detective stories, Poe is popularly known for his horror fiction. He is also recognized as a prominent American poet. His mystery and suspense tales are still widely read around the world. In Poe's poems, like his tales, his characters are tortured by nameless fears and longings. He had a difficult life, burdened by personal tragedy and alcohol problems.

Edgar Allan Poe traveled the human psyche long before Sigmund Freud reached there. His tales and fables demonstrate the unusual and dilemma of psychological disorientation. His stories are

shorter but the after effects are long-lasting. Ever since criticism on him began, it has been argued that many works by Poe contain autobiographical elements. Similar characteristics or experiences which he personally observed are sometimes found in his fictional characters. It is thought that like his poem, 'The Raven', published in 1845, signifies the notion of loss (of death) related to his own life.

As Poe belongs to the period of romantics, it is necessary to talk about the basics of that era. The period during 1828-1865 in American Literature is commonly notable as the Romantic Period in America. American literary Romanticism was derived mainly from the English Romantic poets, particularly Coleridge and Wordsworth, and from the German Romantic philosophy. There are several principal Romantic themes in American literature:

- Intuition (the truth of the hurt) is more trustworthy than reason
- deeply felt experience is more valuable than to elaborate universal principles
- the individual is at the center of life and God is at the center of the individual
- Nature is a collection of physical symbols from which knowledge of the supernatural can be intuited.

Authenticity and excellence have been the aims behind the production of works of fiction during that time. Some legends of American Romantic Period include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. To be more particular about the traits of American Romantic literature may include its strong use of feeling,

its abundant use of symbolism and its exploration of nature and the supernatural. It was during the Romantic Period that Gothic literature was born.

During the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, a literary style has largely got popularity. This style has paved the way for the ghost and horror stories. Naturally this writing has received the name of 'gothic literature'. It usually demonstrates death, despair, horror and other dark subjects in the works of fiction. Most Gothic novels are the mysterious tales which produce shivering in readers' horrified cold blood. They are consisted of the elements of supernatural and paranormal activities. It got the influence from the dark gothic architecture of that period which was taking place in American society. Some gothic tales are set in gothic surroundings like a stormy castle while others may occur in an old house where the residents suffer from alienation or of their guilt. In a nutshell, these stories represent romance, love of the imagery over the logical and are brought into the light through different point of views.

As my focus of the dissertation is symbolism, it is high time to discuss about this stylistic literary device. In achieving ambiguity in the literary works, symbolism acts as the most significant tool which can help the reader comprehending the story as well as to reside aboard.

Symbolism is used in literature from ancient time, as old as from the works of Chaucer. It is a decorative piece of art which can also be used for the sake of other purposes like political, indirect criticizing of the social constructions, violation of humanity etc.

In a work of literature a symbol may emerge in a number of different ways to suggest a number of different things. Most commonly, a symbol will present itself in the form of: 1) a word, 2) a figure of speech, 3) an event, 4) the total action, or 5) a character.

Edgar Allan Poe was fascinated by using symbols as it is a more indirect way for expressing one's own ideas and notions. Most of his works are enriched with symbols which carry the essence of those works. For example, in the short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher', Poe not only highlights the structural fall of that house, rather emphasizes the ending of the Usher bloodline. Similarly, death is signified in the works of 'The Black Cat', 'The Raven', 'Annabel Lee'. Here the paper is focused on this particular point that how and why Poe has used symbols in his selected piece of works and their significance.

## Chapter-2

### **The Notion of Symbolism and its major theories**

In literature among many tools that are used by the writers in order to generate interest in one's work as well as to create another level of meaning, symbolism acts significantly. It is used in literary works to give meaning that goes beyond what is evident to the reader. Without spelling it out, writers can easily put feeling and mood to a piece of work through the use of symbolism. Symbolism is inherent in the very texture of human life. It is not necessary to have commonly used symbols, hence there can be subtle symbolic representations used to hint at something without making it an obvious statement. Symbolism has stepped into the arts in such a way that it has become a vital part of most literary works.

According to etymology (the study of the meaning and the history of the word), a symbol literally means something that has been put together. The source of the word 'symbol' is the Greek word *symbolleîn* (literally 'to throw together'), referred originally to 15 each of the two corresponding pieces of small object which contracting parties broke between them and kept as proof of identity. It refers to the idea of putting things together to contrast them and ultimately become a word that was used for comparison.

From the word symbol came the concept of symbolism where one object is used to refer to something else. So, when an author or a poet uses one object to refer to a completely different idea, then he or she is employing symbolism.

## **Types of Symbols**

Symbolism is one of the tools most useful in interpreting art and literature. There are two key types of symbolism we come across in analyzing literature, dreams, or even our life experiences are: conventional and personal symbols.

### **Conventional Symbols (Cultural or Universal)**

People having the same cultural background carry similar meanings of any particular sign. It varies from different cultural contexts and sometimes expresses completely opposite meanings to the other world. For example, the wedding color of our country is majorly represented by red while in western countries it is black-n-white. Similarly we wear white on the occasion of funeral while the westerners wear black. Both individuals and groups create new symbols when they are in need of doing that. Likewise, a student facing difficulty in Physics will find the equations complex as those are the physics symbols for him.

### **Personal Symbols (Contextual or Private)**

These are the symbols which changes from author to author or dreamer to dreamer; an interpretation of a serpent in a dream may be different from that of my neighbor, especially if the interpretation of serpent for me is representing the foresight of something ominous is coming its way and my neighbor sees it as the symbol of Hindu god of protection. Similarly, one may see heart as only a human body organ while other person may interpret it as the chamber of love.

## **Theories of Symbolism**

Different scholars and theorists emerged themselves in understanding and providing theories of symbolism such as North Whitehead, Ferdinand de Saussure, Sigmund Freud, Joseph Campbell, Paul Tillich and others constructing a set of theories of the symbol.

### **Ferdinand de Saussure's Vision on Symbolism**

Saussure believes that understanding of signs and symbols depend on the two essential elements of the stream of symbolism. They are the signified and the signifier. Signifier represents the abstract concept in the human mind which is termed as signified. When a sense is produced through the use of a sign, it is called a signified. On the other hand, the literal or visible form of the represented signified is named as a signifier. Signifier is the result of the cognition process of our brain which consists of visible signs transformed into verbalization and subsequently brought into reality.

### **Alfred North Whitehead's Vision on Symbolism**

To Whitehead, there are two principal components of the symbolism process; the human mind is functioning symbolically when it encounter in his experience in life a set of components, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of its experience.

The former set of these components are the "symbols". Then there is a transition from the symbol to the meaning that will be called "symbolic reference". The latter requires a ground founded on some community between the natures of symbol and meaning. But such a common element in the two natures does not in itself necessitate symbolic reference, nor does it decide which shall be symbol and which shall be meaning, nor does it secure that the symbolic reference shall be immune from producing errors and disasters for the percipient.

## **Sigmund Freud's Vision on Symbolism**

Freud offers two essential theories; the FN and the FB theories of symbolism:

### ***FN Position***

In the (FN) position, the use of the term "symbol" carries similar meanings that can be understood or interpreted by people with the same cultural background; it is universal and sometimes it is an inherited code from the previous generation. For example, the white color represents sadness and the red color represents bloodshed. We inherited that from our previous generation.

*" The first , which may be referred to as the 'Freudian Narrow' position, restricts the use of the term "symbol" to a special technical sense, in which symbols are the elements of unconscious, universal, phylogenetically inherited code" (Petocz, 2003: 24 ).*

### ***FB Position***

The (FB) position restricts symbol to contextual use used in the literary work. It is a particular tool that can differ from one context to another. For instance, the horse is used to interpret multiple meanings; these meanings differ from one work to another. The horse may symbolize speed in one work, and may symbolize beauty in another.

*" The second, may be referred to as 'Freudian Broad' (FB) position, is a much less restricted view, in which the term "symbol" usually refers to any unconsciously produced defensive substitute, while nevertheless retaining certain specifiable connections with conscious, non-defensive production" (Petocz, 2003:24).*

## **Frye's Theory**

Frye's theory of symbols is associated to an analysis of criticism. Literature can be interpreted through contextual reading where phases are themselves regarded as contexts. They are fundamentally meant to describe critical procedures rather than literary types; hence, they reflect methods for analyzing symbolic meaning. For Frye, there are five different phases where symbol is considered as the first of three basic kinds. In that case people encounter the comprehensiveness of reference and its improper usage in Frye's work. Symbol is used to mean any unit of literary structure which can be isolated for critical attention. This broad definition allows Frye to link up the appropriate kind of symbolism with each phase, and thereby define the phase at the highest level of generality. The symbol used as a sign results in the descriptive phase; as motif, in the literal phase; as image, in the formal phase; as archetype, in the mythical phase; and as monad, in the anagogic phase. Before looking at these abstractions more closely, we need to observe the two additional categories underlying Frye's definition of the phases: narrative (or mythos) and meaning (or dianoia). These terms also have a wide range of reference, much wider even than in Frye's theory of modes. One can only indicate the general associations they have in Frye's usage. Narrative is associated with rhythm movement, recurrence, event, and ritual. Meaning is associated with pattern, structure, stasis, precept, and dream. The meaning of —narrative and the meaning of —meaning, then, are never constant, always changing according to the context of Frye's discussion. Frye in his *Anatomy of criticism* asserts that we as readers when we are reading, we find our attention moving in two directions at once; one direction is outward, in which we go outside our reading, from the writers to the things they mean, the other direction is inward, in which we try to appreciate the meaning from the word itself; in both cases we deal with symbols.

## **Langer's Theory of Symbolism**

For Langer, there is a division between symbol and sign; she claims that symbol and sign are different. The ability to use symbols distinguishes humans from the different signs used by the animals. It gifts freedom to humans not only to respond their situation but also to think about it. Besides, symbols allow us to produce descriptions and ideas indirectly related to the actual world where in between that little space we can plan, imagine and converse abstractions to do, in real meaning, the things that make us human. The difference between a sign and a symbol is that a sign causes us to think or act in the face of the thing signified, while a symbol causes us to think about the thing symbolized. Therefore, we can say that a symbol differs from a sign in that the symbol does not declare the subsistence of the object it refers to, but brings this thing to mind.

When a symbol becomes identified with the deeper reality to which it refers, it becomes idolatrous as the "symbol is taken for reality". Here the symbol itself is substituted for the deeper meaning it intends to convey. The unique nature of the symbol is that it gives access to deeper layers of reality which are otherwise inaccessible.

Without symbolism, something essential is missing from language and art. Symbols allow authors to impart ideas above and beyond the literal level of the text. A symbol represents, or stands in place of, something else. Even letters and words themselves are symbols, because our brain turns those markings into thoughts and ideas.

Symbolism, as we have seen previously, is one of the stylistic devices that is often used in narratology to convey certain messages indirectly. It is described as a style in which objects, characters or actions stand for, and represent, notions, ideas and emotions. Such a style is used generally for two major things: decorative and functional (i.e. to change some matters in society). Besides, other concepts that related for this subject are provided for more understanding.

## Chapter-3

### Poe's Short Stories and Symbolism

#### Symbolism and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'

The themes involved in the story are also significant symbols to bring into the light the untold things to the readers' psychology.

Theme of Evil:

Roderick Usher's illness is portrayed as an integral and family evil for which he wishes to be cured, but fails to find any way and becomes dissatisfied.

*"It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy – a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off". (FHU: 20 – 21)*

Theme of Isolation:

Roderick and Madeline Usher shut themselves inside their mansion; they no longer maintain any contact with others. They have made themselves as their only world. Outside was unseen, unreachable to them. They cut themselves off from friends, ideas as well as progress.

Theme of Madness and illness:

Roderick and Madeline suffers from psychological imbalance which can be referred as illness and characterized by anxiety, depression, and other symptoms. Madeline's illness is not an illness itself but a symptom of hysteria, a psychological disorder. Besides, Madeline is not dead when Roderick and the narrator bury her in a vault. On that moment she is lost in a state of coma

where she falls senseless for a long time but ultimately all on a sudden awakens. Unfortunately, she dies with her twin brother, Roderick Usher with the end of the story.

*"The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physician...a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptically character, were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed..." (FHU: 23)*

Theme of Mystery:

From the very beginning, the narrator realizes that he is entering a world of mystery when he crosses the tarn bridge.

*"I know not how it was, but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable...I looked the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye – like windows..." (FHU: 11)*

Theme of family:

The story is about the Ushers family; which was the last race.

*"...it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issues, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher" – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the 32 peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion". (FHU: 15)*

*The Fall of the House of Usher* is one of Poe's most famous short stories. This story provides a basis for understanding Poe's Gothicism. Here he uses symbolism as a contribution in drawing the image of the terrifying house.

### **The Name 'Usher' as a symbol**

The obvious symbol is the name Usher; usher means a door keeper. Likewise, Roderick Usher opens the door of a frightening world to the narrator. He is the last of the descendants of the Usher family. He has no children; therefore, no heirs to carry on the family name or bloodline. The structural 'house of Usher' is old, frail and in poor condition. Roderick Usher is aged, ill and about to die. He knows that when he dies, his family line dies with him. Hence, with applying Whitehead's theory, Usher is a symbol and the door keeper is the symbolic reference of Usher.

*"Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the one being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times."* (FHU: 19)

### **The Title**

Symbolism in the story begins with the title. At the end of the story, the house itself does indeed fall; in the beginning, however, Roderick usher tells the narrator that once his ill twin sister Madeline dies, it "would leave (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers."

*".....So identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher" – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion." (FHU: 15)*

### **The Fungus – Ridden and the Collapsing Mansion**

The word fungus is used over and over again in the story to symbolize the decline of the Usher family. It also symbolizes the weakness and vulnerability of Roderick and Madeline Usher. Besides, it also signifies the physical deterioration of them. As fungus shows the beginning of decaying of a house, here the another term collapsing mansion means the end of Usher family.

*"Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the utterly porous, and evidently decayed condition of the individual stones." (FHU: 16)*

### **The "Vacant Eye – like" Windows of the Mansion**

There is another symbol in the story, the vacant eye – like. The term has many interpretations:

- The sunken, cadaverous eyes of Roderick Usher.
- Madeline Usher's cataleptic gaze.
- The absence of life in the Usher mansion.

In this case, the 'vacant eye – like' windows of the mansion is the symbol and the three interpretations is the symbolic reference. Poe used the vacant eye to describe the evil throughout the story.

*"...I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the re-modelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant-like windows." (FHU: 13)*

### **The Tarn, a Small Lake Encircling the Mansion and Reflecting its Image:**

This is another symbol in the story; it has three possible symbolic references:

(1) Madeline as a twin of Roderick, reflecting his image and personality

(2) The image of reality which Roderick and the narrator perceives; through the water of the tarn reflects details exactly, the image is upside down, leaving open the possibility that Roderick and the narrator see a false reality. It can be linked to Poe's personal belief that what seems real is actually the unreal, artificial, temporary. And what lies under the cover get reflected through the mirror of our heart. That is the ultimate truth- death.

(3) The desire of the Ushers to isolate themselves from the outside world.

*"...or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the re-37 modelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows." (FHU: 13)*

### **The Bridge over the Tarn**

The symbol of the bridge over the tarn demonstrates the only link to the outside world of Roderick Usher with the narrator. It emphasizes the need of a human being to be connected with the outside world, more specifically with people. To do so, there always a need of a bridge in our life.

### **The Storm**

The storm signifies the disoriented emotion of the Usher siblings that are experienced by the narrator in the Usher's house. This emotion is subtle like the nature of Roderick and Madeline Usher who suppress their feelings because of some nameless reasons and lead an alienated life like a stormy night where the night left alone, frightening. Throughout the story, the storm symbolizes the unstable mood of the twins.

*"The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued – for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me."* (FHU: 45)

### **The House of Usher**

It starts with the title that the house of Usher is the main symbol of the story. It refers to both the house as well as the family. It is used to begin a story of a family named Usher and to show the structural description of their house. Their paranormal characters only reside in that house, but the house itself no longer resist their weirdness as ultimately it has fallen apart. The narrator describes the house at length in the beginning of the story. From the outside in, everything about

it seems to be in a state of decline, disrepair or neglect, paralleling the steadily declining health of the occupants.

*"During the whole of dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher." (FHU: 11)*

### **The Ghastly Images inside the House**

It symbolizes the madness of the house's inhabitants. Poe used the appalling images to emphasize his gothic style. The horrifying image of the house drawn in the story is the symbol and madness is its symbolic reference. Usher's preference for isolation places them in a somewhat supernatural realm where they exist with the world, but not in the same world of others'.

*"...I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the re-moddelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems..." (FHU: 13).*

### **The Upside Down Reflection of the House in the Tarn**

Usher's disoriented and unstable thoughts are signified by the upside down reflection of the house in the Tarn.

*"Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zig-zag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn." (FHU: 16)*

### **The Collapsing of the House Straight Down into the Tarn**

This symbolizes the linear fashion of the Usher's family tree and its ultimate collapse. Poe uses this symbol to describe the ultimate ending of Usher's family. They are a dying race; they are disappearing and the house is falling down from its foundation.

*"...there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of 'House of Usher'." (FHU: 46)*

### **The Painting and Poem**

In the middle of the story, Roderick paints a picture of the inside view of the vault. Later, he and the narrator place the supposedly dead Madeline in an almost identical real vault. In the same passage, there is a poem or a ballad called "the haunted palace". It describes a once-beautiful palace in once-green setting in which "evil things, in robes of sorrow/ assailed the monarch's high estate". The Usher Mansion immediately comes to mind, while the "robes of sorrow" are suggestive of Madeline's burial robes. Hence, they are the symbolic reference of the burial robes of Madeline.

*"From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vagueness's at which I shuddered the more thrilling, because I shuddered knowing not why, from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words." (FHU: 25)*

## **The Weather and Moon**

In the final scene, a storm comes up, building along with the narrative; storms in literature have long been used to underscore climatic action. Finally, as the house crumbles into the lake, there is a full, blood-red moon overhead, symbolic of death. Thus, here the weather and then moon are symbols then blood and death are the symbolic reference.

*"The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway...the radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken, as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction to the base." (FHU: 46)*

At the story's end, Roderick dies and the "House of Usher" dies with him. As the narrator of the story rides away from the house, then the structure itself falls.

## **Symbolism and ‘The Black Cat’**

### **The title**

The most obvious symbol in this story is the title itself, ‘The Black Cat’. It can be interpreted as bad luck and misfortune. From the title readers are pushed to be aware of the importance of the cat in the story. They may think that the story could get other titles which would be related to the theme of the narrator’s wife, home or his drinking. But because of the storyline, the center focus of the tale would always remain in the title ‘the black cat’. The title gives the idea of number regarding the black cat. It creates confusion in the readers’ mind that whether there was only one cat or more. They can assume that the first cat, Pluto never dies in the story.

### **The cat (Pluto)**

The first cat’s name is Pluto. It is something unique compared to Poe’s other works as there is rarely found any naming character in his fictional pieces of art. Though he usually does not put names to the characters, but when he does, he does it for conscious purpose. In Greek Mythology Pluto is a euphemism for Hades who was the god of the dead and the underworld. The connection between hell and the dominion of the dead are frequently repeated in the story.

When Pluto becomes a victim of the violence, he is deprived of one of his eyes by his drunken owner. Eyes are a commonly used symbol in Poe’s writing.

Punishing Pluto was not the only reason behind blinding him. As the narrator is conscious about his deterioration, he does not want his dearest pet, Pluto to find it as well. He feels that Pluto can understand while seeing him, he does not want to fall in Pluto’s eyes. It acts as a reason behind the narrator’s aim to blind Pluto. He wants to get rid of the repeated reminder of his disposition

from the mirror in the cat's eyes. Naturally this violence ultimately leads him towards his own death, his self- destruction. Readers can interpret it also in this way that the nature follows its own rules; it is based on cause and effect theory. The deeds one person does to other, finally that comes back to him. Poe indirectly tries to build this notion through this tale.

Pluto's one-eyed appearance refers to another one-eyed person, Odin. In Norse mythology Odin, the god of the dead was the leader of Valhalla where the dead (who died in battle) reached. He observed the events of earth and heaven with the help of his two ravens. He was so obsessed to gain wisdom that he sacrificed one of his eyes to the well of wisdom. For his great sacrifice, he was called the god of foresight. But his quest for knowledge did not stop there. He wanted to acquire the wisdom of the occult which was only for the dead ones. To reach his goal, he ultimately hanged himself and was hanged for nine days until he was raised with that desired power.

The loss of one eye, the hanging and Resurrection are the similarities between Pluto and Odin's fate. Pluto can be interpreted as have been brought back from the dead. Pluto's double has a white mark on his chest which grows with time into the shape of a gallows. After the fire, the only surviving thing of the narrator's house is a form of a gallows. These recurrent images of the gallows have made Pluto's as well as the narrator's fate. In the story it seems that the narrator is possessed by the supernatural powers which gradually drove him insane. While hanging Pluto in the tree, the narrator knew that he was doing that sin for no specific reason. Even on that brutal moment he felt pity for Pluto as well as for him because he understood from his instinct that he was unable to repent for what he had done.

## **Pluto as a Child**

The cat represents the symbol of a child. In the story, the man and his wife do not have any children. This story is concerned with the idea of home and family, and children. Here we can link the autobiographical portrayal of Poe's own life experience. Poe himself did not have any children. There always remains an absence of children in his works. At one point in the story the narrator even likens the second black cat's cry to "the sobbing of a child".

*But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of  
the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my  
blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from  
within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken,  
like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into  
one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous  
and inhuman—a howl- a wailing shriek, half of horror and  
half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of  
hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony  
and of the demons that exult in the damnation (Poe 1843).*

In this chapter we have attempted to analyze Poe's two short stories and interpret the symbols used in the stories of 'The Black Cat' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.

## Chapter-4

### Poe's poems & symbolism

#### “The Raven”

Passion and truth are necessary elements to create a worthy piece of prose, but beauty is essential in making poetry. Surely, both passion and truth help to draw the plot, but their involvement should not exceed beauty because without a balance of three of them- the essence of a poem is lost. Poe believed that beauty was closely linked with eternal sorrow. From that point of view, to be a suitable poetical topic, sadness can easily fit in as the death of a beautiful woman in ‘The Raven’.

The death of his beloved, Lenore, has made the protagonist to confine himself in isolation. He has become detached from the outside world, from others. It is hard for him to get rid of the shock of her death. Throughout the poem he is never out of his room; he is trying to escape from his psychological imprisonment in such a faulty way where he is getting closer to her memory line.

The beginning of the poem dictates about the protagonist's tiredness after contemplating his bookish knowledge and finds discomfort in sleeping. It is because he still lives in the memory of his Lenore who has already passed away. Melancholy or sadness usually makes a person unaware of time. Specifically, the depressed one does not know about day or year. The longing is constant and the person cannot get rid of what s/he has lost. In one passage of the poem, the protagonist wants to try and forget with a drug, called “Nepenthe” that causes oblivion:

*“Respite—respite and Nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!*

*Let me quaff this kind Nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”*

In the poem, the student is suddenly aware of rapping noises coming from the door and later the window pane. As the student explores the rapping sounds, he is once again reminded of his lover as the quote suggests:

*“But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,  
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore!”  
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word “Lenore!”  
Merely this and nothing more.”*

The protagonist is obsessed with the past in this poem. At first, when the raven enters from the window and perches upon the sculpture above his chamber door, he believes the bird to be his lover’s spirit. However, he quickly dismisses it and wants to know its name. At this time he has hardship in differentiating between the real from the unreal because he is in dilemma, in illusion of memory where truth stays far away from him. At first he got horrified seeing a dark raven from such closeness, but now he finds the raven meaningful for his mental satisfaction:

*Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,  
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,  
“Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven,  
Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the Nightly shore—  
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”  
Quoth the raven “Nevermore”*

The stanza marks the end of the first half of the poem. Subsequently, the protagonist seems to get more disoriented and his obsession grows even stronger. The raven's constant reply of the word "nevermore" will eventually draw him further away from reality and the sadness will suppress his common sense. The questions which the student asks and the one-word answer he receives are not "real" at all, that is, they are not voiced; they are elements in an interior psychic debate going forward in the young man's mind. What the Raven replies is merely what the student himself wants to hear, must hear as more and more he enters the dark, subliminal regions of his melancholy.

The protagonist is willingly letting the sadness take over his mind. By asking the raven several questions about his mental cure and after life, he thinks that he is in a conversation; but actually he is speaking to himself. In nineteenth century there was a belief that melancholy often lead to despair and misery; and in Poe's fiction, there is a constant balancing of self-control and self-pity within the protagonist's psyche.

At the end of the poem when the narrator asks the raven to leave his chamber, the raven says nevermore. The soul of the narrator is now been captured by the shadow of the raven. This portrays that the raven as a symbol of grief, loneliness and loss that will never leave his life. He will forget Lenore-"nevermore".

*And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting*

*On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;*

*And his eyes have the seeming of a demon that is dreaming,*

*And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;*

*And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted—nevermore!*

So, the major symbols of this poem are:

**Lenore:** There is no clear description given by the narrator of Lenore. We are untold about her physical appearance as well as the exact relationship between the narrator and her. All we know is that the narrator misses her. The lack of detail about Lenore makes her prone as a symbol. She may represent idealized love, beauty, truth, or hope in a better world. We are told several times that she is rare and radiant, an angelic description, possibly symbolic of heaven. The narrator cannot help but think of her, and her universal, yet subtle nature haunts him.

**The Raven:** From the very beginning, from the poem's title, raven is the most obvious symbol. Though it is a bird, here the representation of raven seems as a power; power of authority. The raven enters the room haughtily and holds dominion over the narrator. The bird's darkness symbolizes death; hence, death becomes a constant reminder, an imperious intruder. If taken in a broader context, the poem may be about the inability of a man to escape from his ultimate fate- a reoccurring theme in Poe's short works. The raven symbolizes depression as well.

**Night's Plutonian Shore:** The phrase "Night's Plutonian Shore" fit in all the negative aspects correlated to death. Pluto is the Roman god of the underworld; hence, his shore would be the underworld. Combined with "night," a common symbol for death and nothingness, and shore, representative of the vast ocean and all its mysterious inhabitants, the Plutonian takes on an enhanced meaning.

*“Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore-  
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”*

Nepenthe: The narrator desperately searches for something that will remove his pain and suffering. This is symbolized by Nepenthe, an ancient drug used to help a person to relieve sorrows.

*“Respite- respite and nepenthe, from thy memories of Lenore.*

*Quaff, oh, quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!*

*Quoth the Raven “Nevermore””.*

The Bust of Pallas: Pallas Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom. It is upon this wisdom that the raven settles, adding belief, at least according to the narrator, to its utterances. The bust of Pallas and the raven's subsequent perch on it may be ironic, for it is the narrator that gives the bird such wisdom. A casual observer would assume the bird sits there because it seems like a logical resting place. But as the speaker is residing in illusion, the normal resting place of the raven seems religious for him.

*“Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door:*

*Perched, and sat, and nothing more.”*

Midnight: Traditionally referred to as the witching hour and the darkest part of night--midnight is more than a number on the clock. It is no accident that Poe chooses this as the time for the bird's arrival to make the incident more gothic.

*“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore-  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
‘Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door-  
Only this and nothing more.””*

December: Nothing lives in the winter. December is in the winter. It symbolizes death as the poem says:

*“Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December:  
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
Eagerly I wished the morrow:- vainly I had sought to borrow  
From my books surcease of sorrow- sorrow for the lost Lenore-  
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore-  
Nameless here for evermore.”*

## **‘Annabel Lee’:**

The poem, ‘Annabel Lee’, is filled with symbols. The poem reflects Poe's real life. For example, the sea symbolizes the bareness and despair which the narrator feels after the loss of his beloved. The sea is mentioned in the second line of the poem as "kingdom by the sea", it may symbolize the power of the sea, which is ultimately the representation of nature's power while kingdom is the manifestation of the authority that people hold. However, the final line of the poem terms the sea as ‘sounding sea’ which leaves the readers with the haunting, emptiness of an open lonely ocean.

*“It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of ANNABEL LEE;”*

Throughout the poem the word sepulchre is mentioned several times. It is the only symbol through which readers get the knowledge of Annabel Lee's death. The term sepulchre stands for both death and horror. It also symbolizes sadness.

*“So that her high-born kinsmen came  
And bore her away from me,  
To shut her up in a sepulcher.”*

The kingdom symbolizes cruelty and tyranny. The place is shown such inhuman where loving someone is treated as a crime and as a consequence of their love - Annabel Lee was snatched from the narrator. He feels horrified and disgusted as his love was stolen from him.

From the title itself, Annabel Lee is the biggest symbol in this poem. She symbolizes Edgar Allan Poe's lost love, Virginia. To show his love and grief for Virginia, he has portrayed the image of Annabel Lee- a symbol of pure beauty and love. Though there is no direct comparison between Virginia and Annabel Lee, the portrayal of his unconditional and eternal love lead towards his own emotion. The narrator here is completely captivated by Annabel Lee that he cannot think of anything but her.

*“For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams*

*Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE:*

*And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes*

*Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE:*

*And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side*

*Of my darling- my darling- my life and my bride,”*

## Chapter-5

### Conclusion

Each and every symbol that is used in Poe's selected works is connected to the theme of darkness. This darkness is neither the absence of light nor just gloomy; rather it signifies the ultimate phase of human life- death. Poe, as an individual was closely associated with the loss of death. He lost his foster mother, sister, elder brother and beloved wife during his lifetime. Especially, the death of his wife hurt him in such a way that he became insane to some extent. Even this loss pushed him to grab alcoholism as an escape from mental pain. It may act as a reason behind his construction of death as a basic element in many works. For him death is the most important part of life. He was ultimately fascinated with death.

Being a 19<sup>th</sup> century man, he portrayed such themes which are as modern as today's current condition. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cursed the world with the horror of the two World Wars. The wars destroyed humanity to a greater extent. People forgot to think about the romantic notions; they forgot to be sober to others. Self-centered mentality, alienation from the society, lack of communication took place among people. There was chaos everywhere. No one was concerned about the need of others. As a literary consequence, the 'absurdist' movement emerged. Surprisingly what they wrote about are mostly similar to the ground of Edgar Allan Poe- the horror, the sufferings of life, death as the ultimate destiny, lack of interaction, lack of affection, separation from the beloved ones etc. So, in that case it can be claimed that Poe was a foreseer of the society, of the modern era, of the consequence of humanity. His writings act like a mirror of the human psyche. They reflect the overload of the bearing of loss and pain of human beings. It might be the reason behind his gothic style where he wanted to display the horrifying

events of life as regular phenomena. He might want to prove that the presence of negativity is more obvious in reality instead of the positive vibes. To complete this task he chose to use symbols in his writing as the best option through which he can tell a lot of things while saying less.

In the short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher', through the aid of numerous symbols Poe has set the story of two unusual characters- the last heir of the Usher family- the twin, Roderick and Madeline Usher. From the narrator's view we see that he enters a bleak, gloomy mansion of his childhood friend, Roderick where different paranormal things happen. Roderick Usher's miserable health condition, Madeline's almost death etc. are shown by the symbolic fall of the structural Ushers' house. With this fall along with their death, the race of Usher bloodline ends here. Likewise, the reference of the stormy night symbolizes the disoriented mindset of Roderick Usher. Besides, the presence of the notions of a blood-red moon, a tarn, a bridge and other symbols have created a gothic environment in the story. Each of the symbols carry a lot of importance in making this horror story happen.

Likewise, 'The Black Cat' is a story which carries symbolism from its title itself. Here the black cat signifies the narrator's guilt, his deterioration and finally his death. The mention of a second cat in the story brings a supernatural fragrance where it is thought to be a psychological version of the first one, Pluto. Poe consciously put this symbol of double to confuse the narrator as well as the readers about the demise of Pluto. As the narrator hangs Pluto for no reason, the entry of the second cat makes him thoughtful about the confirmity of Pluto's death. At this point he finds that by blinding and then hanging Pluto, he is still unable to forget his wrong deeds; he cannot

run from himself. Ultimately he falls a victim of supernatural powers- he falls into madness. At the end he dies. The whole storyline is structured on the basis of symbolism which Poe wanted to be searched by his readers.

Being a well known short story writer, Poe has also produced a large number of poems which includes 'The Raven', 'Annabel Lee', 'Lenore', 'Dreams', 'To Helen' etc. Among them 'The Raven' is a poem which is not only about a bird, rather here Poe creates it as the death of a beautiful woman who was the beloved of the speaker of that poem. From the beginning till the end this poem speaks about the constant grief and sense of loss of the speaker. Once in a stormy night a raven comes to get shelter against the window of the speaker's (a young student) chamber. By opening the door the student finds no traveler who could come here to seek shelter: rather a raven enters his room. At first he gets terrified, but gradually he feels comfortable with the presence of the raven as it replies his queries. Though every time he gets the same one word answer 'nevermore', it somehow heals his wound of shock. He starts to think that it is a real conversation while the truth is that 'nevermore' is the only word which the raven has learnt. Besides, the raven is not capable of answering any question by its own. But for the student, these are his desired answers which he actually wanted to hear from another person. Unfortunately, his grief is as deep as he fails to distinguish between the real and unreal. Thus the whole poem is the reflection of a collection of symbols purposely used by Poe.

'Annabel Lee', Poe's another marvelous poem represents his immortal unconditional love for his wife. Though there is no direct mention of it, but from his personal life, we can assume this coincident as a conscious manifestation of his own personal grief. In the poem the speaker tells

that the love between him and his beloved Annabel Lee is so deep that the angels of heaven envy them. Because of that envy, the angels have brought about his beloved's death prematurely. Surprisingly, the angels fail to end their love as the speaker declares that neither angels nor demons can separate the loving souls of him and his Annabel Lee's. His love is still as strong as before that now he regularly sleeps every night by the side of his beloved Annabel Lee's tomb which is situated near to the sea. The poem is based on the symbols of the sea, Annabel Lee's sepulcher, a kingdom etc. and of course the name Annabel Lee. If we try to interpret the poem without these symbols, we will find nothing left in the structure as because the symbols are the soul of this poem.

## References

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." Complete tales and poems by Edgar Allan Poe. Web-Books.Com

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Raven." Complete tales and poems by Edgar Allan Poe. Web-Books.Com

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Ed. Julia Reidhead. New York: Norton, 2003.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Black Cat." Complete tales and poems by Edgar Allan Poe. Web-Books.Com

Poe, Edgar Allan. "Annabel Lee." Complete tales and poems by Edgar Allan Poe. Web-Books.Com

Frye, N. Anatomy of Criticism Four Essays . New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1957.

Langer, S. K.. Philosophy in New Key: A Study in Symbolism and Reason, Rite. 1954.

Petocz, A., Freud, Psychoanalysis, and Symbolism, Combridge: University Press. 2003.

Saussure, F. D. Course in General Linguistics .New York: McGraw-Hill. 1990.

Sigmund, F.. Dream Psychology. <http://www.gutenberg.org>.and Art. 1920.

Todorov, T. Symbolism and Interpretation, New York: Cornell University press. 1982.

Whitehead, A. N. Symbolism its Meaning and Effect, Cambridge: Bentley House,  
University Press. 1927.