Edgar Allan Poe - Subjecting the Subject: The Subject-Object Equation

Dr. V.N. Vamsidhar Kilari
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Mail ID: vkilari@jazanu.edu.sa

Abstract:

The male characters in Edgar Allan Poe's stories are either artists or poets. The ideal towards which they strive is imaginative self-reliance of a kind that is removed from the material and materialistic to exclude them from consciousness. A suppressed form of violence operates as an undercurrent and originates from the aggression that the male characters resort to in order to ward off their own fears.

In *The Oval Portrait*, the painter's desire to portray his wife is the manifestation of his voyeuristic and fetishizing tendencies and killing the woman into art manifests the highest form of creativity. The artist tries to create through his gaze a new woman-an attempt at causing a kind of metempsychosis. In *The Oblong Box* the dead Mrs. Wyatt is the real object of desire and remains 'a thing of beauty' even in death. Wyatt wishes to hold on to his object of desire and literally gazes upon it every night by on fling the coffin wherein lies Mrs. Wyatt. The arrangement made by Wyatt and Captain Hardy to transport Mrs. Wyatt's body in secret shows that death is a taboo and no one is comfortable thinking about death, or staying close to a dead body for a long period of time.

The male protagonists in Poe try to usurp the share earmarked for women in the domestic space. In *'The Black Cat,* the household which is considered to be domain of women, becomes the site for the destruction of the male ego. Even from his death cell, the narrator tries to assert his ego. The narrator's acts of destroying the beauty of the beast in order to bring it closest to the 'bestial' ushers in the element of the involvement with the erotic in the story. Scheherazade in *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade* lays open the possibility of creating an alternative mode of experience, in which even the king gets interested and initiates the process of employing gynocritics from within patriarchy. Scheherazade's death is closely related to the erotic. She is aware of the potential of bodily death resulting out of the condition of being married to the king. Scheherazade denies the tyranny of closure by accepting death not merely as an end to her physical existence but also as a means of depriving the king of possibilities of the knowledge of the worlds yet unknown to him. Death holds no horror for her.

The Colloquy of Monos and Una depicts death as a pause or a caesura; a period of sleep or dormancy, as irrational and erotic; as beautiful; and fraught with sentimentality as it separates individuals from their loved ones. The position of woman in a man-woman relationship as the dominated is further enhanced in *Hop-Frog* because the king is not only the receptacle of power drawn from his gender but also by virtue of the power of the state. In the androcentric world, this embodies supreme power. Aggression is a part of any state machinery. Hop-Frog and Trippetta, are also capable of being aggressive. Death then is seen as a means to an end-of closure and finality. The agents of death here transgress the taboo of death in the backdrop of an extravaganza and create an occasion for the death of the king, subvert the establishment and the power related with it, and earn for themselves their freedom.

Violence and the erotic are closely related. And so are the erotic and the presence or absence of morality. The depiction of aggression in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* is a stinging comment on human beings' voluntary denial of the recognition of their own destructive traits. The death of the L'spanayes is a pointer to the irrationality of death, and the element of the macabre and morbid related to it. The erotic/macabre aspect of death does not, however, aim at the union of the lovers. It originates, in the case of Marie, in her desire for attaining her love, and as an embodiment of lust in case of her paramour. The transgressive aspect of desire in *The Purloined Letter* is what gives the queen's unclaimed relationship the flavour of

the erotic. Eroticism is amoral. The minister inflicts psychological violence in order to exert control over the woman. His narcissism, and hence sense of superiority, are fed by the power that he enjoys, and in turn encourages him to exert himself even more. The forces of death and evil lose the battle they launch by the same rules that they enforce, and life finally triumphs, through the actions of Dupin.

One can guide towards the realization that agency or subjectivity forms the mainstay in any human relationship. In a heterosexual relationship the subject-object divide, as is well known, is based on gender. Poe uses his 'negative capability', re-lives the experiences of the 'objects' in human relationships, transcends the gender divide, and shows that power relationships and notions of gender are more transient than immanent.

Key words: Edgar Allan Poe - subjecting the subject -the subject-object equation - voyeurism - fetishism - eroticism - macabre - metempsychosis - aggression - metempsychosis - necrophilia - taboo - Gothic - annihilation - gratification - misogynistic - heterosexual

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The male characters in Edgar Allan Poe's stories are either artists or poets. The ideal towards which they strive is imaginative self-reliance of a kind that is removed from the 'material and materialistic to exclude them from consciousness and subjectively destroy them'[1] maintains Richard Wilbur; *The Oval Portrait* amply illustrates it.

Poe begins *The Oval Portrait* with a sinister and Gothic tinge to the atmosphere-an abandoned Chateau in the Apennines, and injured traveler seeking shelter, a turret chamber, paintings on the wall, and finally the revelational Oval Portrait heightening the mystery that surrounds the narrative. The object is woman, painted, frozen and contained in two dimensions forever. The beautifully filigreed frame is her prison. The narrator's volition-shifting the candelabrum-results in an accidental discovery - the light revealing the portrait in particular niche in the wall-the final outcome of which is a revelation as it triggers off yet another whole narrative of women being represented. The style of the vignette is very telling style. It blurs out the margins, effectively blurring out the identity of the subject of the portrait which is consequently the object of the gaze. The narrator indulges in fetishizing the woman, a trait ingrained in his character which catches him unaware as he is initially shocked at his own response to the painting. 'I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes'[2]. But soon he recovers to comment: 'It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought'[3]. However, he eventually gives himself away with these words to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and certain gaze. In a few moments I again looked fixedly at the painting'[4]. The gaze apparatus begins operating. It presupposes an agent or subject and a patient or object. In a patriarchal set up it is almost invariably a male, masculine, possessive, virile, powerful subject against a female (not Showalter's gynocentric female), feminine, passive, powerless object. The story takes a turn for complexity as the narrator does not openly indulge in fetishism but tries to turn the attention of the reader away from himself to the painting by highlighting his delirious state and abdicating responsibilities for his statements. His final move is to shift on to the book lying by the bedside. It opens out a narrative within a narrative. The result is, however, not very dissimilar.

The protagonist or subject under focus is the artist-painter-husband. The object of his gaze is his wife-the woman in the portrait and his model, and later the portrait itself. The painter's desire to portray his wife is the manifestation of his voyeuristic and fetishizing tendencies. While the narrator's gaze is his way of warding off the threat of the woman, the painter's gaze moves one step further and harms her with excessive control-it kills her. The 'death, then, of a beautiful woman, [becomes] unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world'[5]. Consequently, killing the woman into art manifests the highest form of creativity. The artist tries to create through his gaze a new woman-an attempt at causing a kind of metempsychosis. Such a woman would mold perfectly into the masculine image of the stereotyped woman, captured and framed. A living woman would, as a complex, thinking, rational human being, threaten his imaginative self-reliance. The threat that she poses as a castrated entity also gets difficult to ward off. Hence, annihilation through voyeurism and

fetishism, both violent in nature, would be the best way out of this impasse.

The story is not one of complete suppression through violence. The stereotyped woman fights back. She resorts 'woman-speak'-silence-and the gaze of a woman looking back subverts the painter's attempts to contain and frame her. Her vignette with no margins becomes the site from where she re-emerges. Her life-likeness has to be seen to be heard and the painter confesses, 'this is indeed life itself'[6]. Desire in human beings is all consuming. Human beings give into it. In an erotic union it is achieved through death-either of the self or more often by negating the existence of the other through complete domination. For the painter husband the fear of having to lose his self as subject prevents him from approaching anywhere close to giving in to the all-consuming desire. Instead he resorts to killing his desire by killing his object of desire, by converting her into an artifact. The wife or model achieves the high point of desire, epitomized by her willingness to give in to her husband's wishes while having to suffer the violence of being sucked out of her life. Her death signifies her readiness to move towards the union, but not having achieved the gratification, she dies leaving behind her essential spirit in her portrait.

A suppressed form of violence operates as an undercurrent and originates from the aggression that the male characters resort to in order to ward off their own fears. The narrators exercise in fetishism is a form of defensive aggression to repel the threat of the castrated woman. The painter's aggression is initially defensive when he decides to capture her in a painting, trying to come to terms with an imminent threat that she poses to him. This grows to take the form of a sadistic pleasure, which is malignant and he imprisons help by not only curtailing her movement and spirit but also ultimately killing her.

Death manifests itself in a variety of ways in *The Oval Portrait* and death imageries abound. The Gothic ambience is the trigger and is heightened as one is introduced to the characters and the way they think. The male characters read death a final. It is a means to their end of possession and control. 'Killing' becomes a way of safeguarding their 'integrity' as individuals-discontinuous and whole. For the woman, on the other hand, death is a way to continuity; it is a way of opening a door to freedom, transcending the restrictive discontinuity of the body of the individual self. It is a reiteration of the possibility of a greater continuity outside of the self. It is a surrendering of a less significant mode of existence for the achievement of the continuity of existence itself. She comes 'back' into the world--not having left it completely at all--to express her own love for the artist. She breaks out of the barriers of Art in order to bring about a meeting of Art and Life, not cancelling out each other. In her meek 'voice' she points out the continuity is a matter of experience, of sensing, and can be achieved in that one single moment. It does not need to be 'captured' as a matter of prolonging the sense of assurance that it will happen again. And if one is willing there is always life after death.

The Oblong Box is to some degree an inversion of the circumstances found in *'The Oval Portrait.*' This time a dead woman is replaced by an impersonator and her body is preserved, ironically, by giving the impression of an artwork to the rest of the world. In both these stories the husbands are connoisseurs of art and 'collectors' in their own right. What Wyatt has collected, not very surprisingly. turns out to be the woman he loved.

The word 'woman' here carries a very well defined conventional meaning. She is marked by her class or social status, her grooming and social manners, and most notably, her beauty. The theorem, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, however, could have as many riders to it as there are beholders. So when the narrator finds Mrs. Wyatt positively plain bordering on the ugly, he tries to satisfy his curiosity by concluding that there is probably more to her than meets his eye but which would definitely have met Wyatt's-'when beauty was the theme, I well knew with what facility he soared into the regions of the purely ideal'[7]. Though this is an uneasy explanation, it's better than having none at all. Or else it would have been a sure case of the entrapment of Wyatt by Mrs. Wyatt which would give not only Wyatt's aesthetic sense a beating but also the conventional practice of the man's

prerogative in choosing his partner and the popular love conventions something to think about. There are several different sets of women presented in the story--the first, the women passengers on the ship outside the Wyatt family; the second, Wyatt's two sisters, and the third, Mrs. Wyatt. The women passengers are the social spokespersons, upholders of social norms, and pass judgment on Mrs. Wyatt's social behaviour by behaving patronizingly and laughing at her more often than with her. Wyatt's two sisters (known to the narrator to be amiable) are found to be unsociable, preferring to keep themselves in the seclusion of their state-room. Mrs. Wyatt directed to impersonate another woman, the real Mrs. Wyatt, but unschooled in the ways of acceptable social behaviour becomes quite an oddity on the ship. Left quite unguarded by the Wyatt family, she is caught between her natural self and borrowed conventions of the woman she is supposedly trying to live as. Her attempt to arrive at equipoise leaves her precariously balanced: being chatty and coquettish on the one hand and paying lip-service to her beloved husband on the other. She is not only a prisoner of the veneers of a cultured and acceptable society but also of the dead real Mrs. Wyatt locked away in her coffin - the fourth category of women in the story.

The dead Mrs. Wyatt is the real object of desire and remains 'a thing of beauty' even in death. It is her legendary beauty that inspires Wyatt towards his ideal in love, and heightens the impersonator's plainness and lack of good looks. Wyatt's concept of love, however poetic, does not come up to meet the challenges of the idea in eroticism, which seeks continuity at the cost of dissolution of either of the partners, and possession by the other. Mrs. Wyatt has taken that final plunge through death. Wyatt, who has a heightened yet restrictive sense of the definition of self and other, holds back. He wishes to hold on to his object of desire and literally gazes upon it every night by on fling the coffin wherein lies Mrs. Wyatt. It is in this situation that he finds himself relatively secure. He believes that he has achieved erotic union through the possession of his beloved in her death. However when the ship starts to sink and the worldly status quo, symbolized by the ship, loses equipoise, Wyatt's own subject position vis-à-vis his relationship with his wife gets a jolt. He realizes that Mrs. Wyatt is already closer to the position he had always felt to be his. There is no stopping her from claiming for herself a more equal role in the erotic relationship by subverting his subject position in the subject - object dynamics. His imaginative self-reliance as lover takes a heating. He decides to take a drastic measure--not seeking continuity but destroying himself and his newly re-defined object so that his dominance and selfhood are not threatened the really sought continuity, he would not have to literally act out a scene of 'achieving union', because continuity, after all, is a matter that presupposes a death-like experience as well.

Wyatt's expression of grief at the death of his beloved is more of an expression of his necrophilous nature rather than merely the intensity of his love. His lack of Interest in conversing with an old acquaintance and his staying away from company are dimensions of his necrophilous nature. The narrator does not fail to point out that Wyatt 'was gloomy, even beyond his usual habit--in fact he was close'[8]. The most telling evidence of necrophilia is Wyatt's desire to be close to the corpse of his wife. He not only prefers to keep it in his state-room but also cherishes it as one would cherish an artifact. This preference is definitely not an expression of the intensity of his love, or celebration of the memories of his wife, but an obsession with the dead body of his wife.

The arrangement made by Wyatt and Captain Hardy to transport Mrs. Wyatt's body in secret shows that death is a taboo and no one is comfortable thinking about death, or staying close to a dead body or a long period of time. In the nineteenth century, the loss of another person in the family is expressed very vocally and sentimentally by the rest of the family. But death in general is a concern that it's better to keep away from daily life. The grieving Wyatt family maintains a very calm exterior until Wyatt is prodded by his friend and starts behaving hysterically. The loss of Mrs. Wyatt to the family is much greater than they show, and the new Mrs. Wyatt's behaviour stands out because of her extreme chattiness in the face of Wyatt's and his sisters' depressive behaviour. There is a clear division between family and non-family in the sharing of the grief and Wyatt's attachment can be traced to his necrophiliac disposition as well.

When Washington Irving sends *Rip Van Winkle* out of the home on a journey of self-actualization, it is the beginning of a new American myth. Poe does a volte-face by bringing his male protagonists; homeward to give them a space where they can seek their individuality. The male protagonists in Poe try to usurp the share earmarked for women in the domestic space. Some succeed for a while until the women in the stories subvert the male preoccupation with the control over the domestic space and claim a share in that space. *The Black Cat* is an evidence of this reversal. In this tale 'a series of mere household events'[9]. becomes consequential enough for the narrator to have to give up his life. The household which is considered to be domain of women, and therefore not very important, becomes the site for the destruction of the male ego, It is noteworthy how, even from his death cell, the narrator tries to assert his ego yet again. He abdicates his responsibility of being accountable for his actions because his senses had taken leave of him when he had committed them. Secondly, by repeatedly claiming that he is not mad, he makes the reader wonder whether he is realty sane and also why is he overdoing this act of establishing his sanity? The reader is left in a dilemma. On the one hand, the narrator cannot be judged for his crimes if one accepts that he is mad; on the other hand the narrator gets away from having to bear the burden of condemnation for his actions as he pleads guilty for his crimes. In both cases, the narrator maintains the position of a subject or the doer without being responsible for it.

In return the narrator expects 'unqualified' devotion from woman and beast alike. It heightens his sense of security and his self-esteem. He is happy that his wife has 'a disposition not uncongenial with his own'[10],as compatibility in marriage considerably reduces his sense of insecurity. Simultaneously, he derives a sense of gratification from the 'unselfish and self-sacrificing love of the brute'[11], Pluto. As his intemperance grows he realizes that even Pluto avoids his presence. The narrator takes exception to this and punishes Pluto first by mutilating it and then killing it. He then replaces this pet with another and tries to restore the erstwhile domestic configuration. His sense of security is challenged yet again, and more emphatically, when his wife steps in to save the second cat from his wrath. The silent woman, who has also suffered much from the atrocities of her husband's intemperance, stands up for a silent animal. The narrator is threatened and murders his wife in order to put an end to the threat. The cat becomes more than just rival for the narrator's wife's attention. It becomes the cause for his wife's revolt. By interfering with her husband's attempt to kill the cat, the woman challenges the narrator's role as the master of the household. The narrator is unable to accept this act of defiance and, in a fit of rage, kills his wife. The household is a space, which the narrator wants to use as the space which provides shelter and caters to his needs, which when fulfilled, prepares him for another venture into the outside world. His wife's action of preventing him from trying to kill the animal interferes with this use of the household space as she subverts his male preoccupation with control, and retains control over this space even through her death. The narrator's attempt to violate the limits of the domestic space leads to his own destruction. In his effort to prove his ability to control the domestic space unto himself and to the world, he oversteps as he overreaches and causes himself to be led to the gallows. The narrator's acts of destroying the beauty of the beast in order to bring it closest to the 'bestial' ushers in the element of the involvement with the erotic in the story.

The wife's inclination towards eroticism is characterized by her efforts to create a domestic space conducive to her husband's taste. She procures certain pets for her husband and even suffers verbal and physical abuse in order that the home could be left relatively untouched by the narrator's excesses. When the narrator tries to destroy the second cat, as he had earlier destroyed the beauty of the first and then murdered it, his wife tries to intervene because the cat embodies a possible point of communion between the husband and wife. Once that is destroyed the scope for the erotic diminishes considerably. Moreover, the destruction of the beauty of the animal and the invocation of the bestial are seen by the woman as another step towards a movement away from the erotic. The narrator shows no inclination for the erotic because it simultaneously demands a violation of the other as well as a surrendering of the self. Insecure as he is, he is unwilling to surrender the position of the subject. Instead he resorts to

aggression in order to maintain his sense of security.

The narrator resorts to defensive aggression, like Usher in order to ward off the threat of insecurity. He feels that by asserting himself he will be able to maintain his position as 'master' of the household and also reduce the possibility of having to contend with Pluto for his wife's attention. The suppressed traits of malignant aggression- sadism and cruelty--germinate and he starts resorting to violence as the sole means of resolving all his problems. Alcohol acts as a catalyst and aggravates his aggression. And finally, his necrophiliac nature finds expression in the means he chooses of disposing the body of his murdered wife. Of the various means that occur to him, he chooses to wall her up so that she can be gotten rid of and 'preserved' at the same time.

The death of the wife and the disappearance of the cat do not bring about his salvation. Although the narrator sees death as final, there operates in the story a machinery of redressal. The woman's attitude of assenting to life is re-enacted. It is here that one finds a direct link between the woman and the cat. The cat embodies the woman's spirit of denial of the finality of death. It gets walled in along with the woman and survives to tell her tale. The wife-cat combine, by exposing the husband, opens out a channel for future union through the transgression of a taboo, death by murder, as it simultaneously subverts the narrator's role as the dominant subject in the relationship between the husband and the wife. This exposure also gives the narrative a chance to complete a full circle.

The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade as the title suggests is a stop towards setting right an omission--the omission of the last tale so long untold. In one stroke this story handles the various strategies of lending a voice to a tale that lends factuality to fiction. In an androcentric social milieu the tale of a woman is often consigned to the realm of fiction. Poe, along with Scheherazade, retrieves the tale from anonymity and establishes its political correctness.

The tale is to a great extent a variation of the Bluebeard theme. A misogynistic monarch murders his wives. His action is backed by religious ratification-another bastion of male domination. Scheherazade challenges the whim of the king and its backing by religion when she sends a proposition through her father to the king ironically enough, when the king receives the message he is at prayer. This is the first step towards challenging the male discourse. Scheherazade's 'disobedience' of her father's advice is the second challenge to the male discourse. She further challenges the male discourse by refusing to subscribe to the stereotype of the silent woman. She chooses to initiate a parallel narrative of her own. The king's curiosity is aroused when he finds himself getting excluded from it. Scheherazade narrates her stories in a hushed tone to her sister. This is a clear instance of the use of female language in an all-woman set up. Her narratives are deliberately left incomplete and signify an endless deferral of meaning and avoidance of closure. The open-endedness of her narrative helps save her life for some time because it becomes impossible for the king to attribute one single meaning to it, subject it to the tyranny of closure and to conventional modes of signification. The presence of the fantastic in Scheherazade tale is an indication of the questioning of the conventional male discourse. She lays open the possibility of creating an alternative mode of experience, in which even the king gets interested for some time, and initiates the process of employing gynocritics from within patriarchy. The use of women's language empowers Scheherazade to a great extent. Although she finally meets her fate, she does not suffer in silence as is her want. The sporadic attempts by the king to make an entry into the narrative take place through words of disbelief and contestation. He refuses to give any sort of recognition to the woman's story, except for that one instance when there is an allusion to the scriptures: "That now I believe,.... because I have read something of the kind before in a book'[12]. Finally, he puts an abrupt end to the tale when his wife talks about the possibility of changing the conventional quotient of female beauty. This is purely a male domain and he allows no interference there. It affects his position as subject in a man-woman relationship. Scheherazade dies, leaving her narrative incomplete. But her purpose is served. She begins a new history as an alternative to the existing androcentric one, which is characterized by a clearly marked end. Scheherazade's history by virtue of remaining incomplete leaves scope for

addition, growth, and change. Further, she subverts the male discourse by leaving the challenge she sets before the institution of king and state open. While the bowstring is being tightened, instead of giving in to the tyranny of death, she is aware of her ultimate victory in 'depriving him of many inconceivable adventures'[13].

Scheherazade's death is closely related to the erotic. Her life is an embodiment of the spirit of assenting to life up to the point of death. She is aware of the potential of bodily death resulting out of the condition of being married to the king. This threat does not deter her. She tries to make the king aware of the possibility of harmony in a heterosexual relationship through her various narratives. The narratives symbolize the possibility of excess, of defying constricting boundaries of conventional notions and beliefs, of transgression. Her narrative, as an assault on conventionality, opens out avenues for alternative experience through violation. This violation is constructive. It enhances the chances of life to continue. The king's acts of violation invoke that spirit of the erotic, which embodies possession and control over others. The king is the Sadeian 'sovereign man'[14]. He is completely self-centred, as Bataille characterizes the Sadeian sovereign man, and considers everyone else his victim. The gratification of his own pleasures is his sole aim. He sees harmony in erotic relationships as a denuding factor, which eats away from the pleasure of complete control and power over the others. For him there can only 'be victims, not partners'[15]. As the sovereign man, the king is beyond the purview of taboo and hence he can openly seek the gratification of his desires. He indulges in excessive exhaustion of his energies. Yet the resultant is unproductive because he is not able to break through the presence of religion and attain all the energy that he would need to gratify his desires. The Sadeian explanation here would be that 'he grows feeble by spending his strength in vain and spends his strength because he thinks he is feeble'[16]. The inherent self-centeredness of erotic pursuits, enhanced by his own aggressive nature, prompts him towards aggression.

The king's behaviour is characterized by cruelty, destructiveness, and sadism. All these three are characteristic of the desire to inflict pain; and harm others. The king's sadistic nature makes him use his position of unrivalled power to exert control over his wives in general, and Scheherazade in particular. The destructive trait in his character induces him to rob his victims of their lives. The sadistic violence defining the relationship between the king and Scheherazade is epitomized by the knowledge of a trend that he has set up. He marries the most beautiful woman of his kingdom only for a single night after which she is put to death. The wife has to spend her nuptial night waiting to be killed. One wonders whether death is not more welcome than living with this constant anxiety.

The king doles out death to exhibit his power. He signs Scheherazade's quietuses in order to relieve himself from the possibility of being overtaken by her narrative, which signifies a challenge to the established modes of signification. There is no sentimentality attached with death in this story. It is violent and defined by the will of the king. The element of the supernatural that is related with death is replaced by a mechanical quality, which signifies predictability and closure. Like the other women characters discussed so far, Scheherazade, the object of this relationship, denies the tyranny of closure by accepting death not merely as an end to her physical existence but also as a means of depriving the king of possibilities of the knowledge of the worlds yet unknown to him. Death holds no horror for her. She risks entering a relationship, doomed to end vicinity. with a mission: to 'redeem the land from the depopulating tax upon its beauty, or perish, after the approved fashion of all heroines, in the attempt'[17]. She triumphs in her mission. Though death eventually comes to her, it comes after she has deflected its purpose and subverted the tyrant's domination.

The Colloquy of Monos and Una is a dialogue with a deliberate philosophical touch. It is a long discussion between the two partners, who have both met after going through the process of death. Monos narrates to Una his experiences from the moment of death till the period when he is reborn.

Una for her part is largely silent. Her role, it appears, is to set the dialogue in motion so that Monos can elaborate on his experiences. She is a

character who cannot initially comprehend the philosophical subtleties of language and natural phenomena. What is very striking in her utterances, however, is the predominance of words and ideas related to forwarding the cause of life. This biophilic aspect of both-her desire and her use of language-gives rise to a new and challenging perspective in her dialogue with Monos. There is also a burning desire in her to know. It is through knowledge that she wants to empower herself in order to be in a position to share that second chance of life on a more equal footing. Una wants to graduate from a level of innocence or ignorance to one of experience or awareness. She addresses the 'propensity of man to define the indefinable'[18], in order to lend a recognizable shape and legitimacy to her own desire for knowledge.

The domain of the erotic is another area of shared experience in human life. The 'Colloquy' speaks quite openly about the discontinuous status of human beings and their efforts at seeking continuity. As the dialogue between Monos and Una begins in their 'second race'[19] the stage has already been set, it is indicative of their hiring moved towards a union. Una recognizes the discontinuity of natural and human existence. She also recognizes the possibility of achieving continuity. She would much rather term death as a period of 'torpor' instead of 'life's cessation'.[20] Through this death the two partners achieve erotic union. The violence and violation caused by the death of the body are accepted as part of this process of union. Monos' description of his experiences of dying unto the body is fraught with erotic overtones, which brings out the intimate relationship between eroticism and death. In his state of torpor Monos finds his sense of touch heightened, and is thrilled by Una's presence and touch which signifies an intensified sensuality: 'Thus the pressure of your fingers upon my eyelids, at first only recognized through vision, at length, long after their removal, filled my whole being with a sensual delight immeasurable. I say with a sensual delight'.[21] His present state of transcendence from a lifeless body into one of heightened consciousness beyond the realms of morality-painful or pleasurable-indicates a heightening of the erotic. At this point, Monos has made him ready for erotic union. Death, as excess, has prepared him to take that final plunge where other mundane and earthly considerations have been either bypassed or swallowed into the vortex of heightened sensuality. Una, now is merely an object for him, her presence makes him ecstatic but cannot respond to her emotions. She is an object to be consumed by his passion and he waits for the final moment to arrive It arrives when like Madeleine and Usher, Una and Monos are united in the grave. The erotic union is achieved and, along with it, purgation of all the heightened passion.

Monos death experience embodies an instance of ecstatic destructiveness. He overcomes his individual separateness through his erotic union with Una by virtue of a trancelike ecstasy whose destructiveness is contained through a narcissistic involvement with the Self. The Other-Una-remains the via media for the pleasure, which Monos achieves by indulging in ecstatic destructiveness.

The *Colloquy* depicts death as a pause or a caesura; a period of sleep or dormancy, as irrational and erotic; as beautiful; and fraught with sentimentality as it separates individuals from their loved ones. It is also a substantial exploration of the concepts of the death of the self-la mort de soi-as well as the death of the other--la mort de toi. Monos' death is a pause where he waits for the union with Una to occur. He describes it as a period of sleep or dormancy and this shows his concern for his own death. He elaborates on his own experiences of dying and relates them to the world around. His death plunges him into a world that is unfamiliar, yet beautiful, and as mentioned earlier, is closely related to eroticism. His death, apart from the initial shock of it, is quite painless and he enjoys the pleasurable sensations after death, subscribing to the concept of beautiful death. Hell has completely disappeared. The effect of his death on those alive is quite contrary. Una, his beloved, mourns for him, after the typical fashion of the nineteenth century, accompanied by an overt display of motions, while the others display a reverential attitude: 'And this was in truth the Death of which these bystanders spoke reverently, in low whispers-you sweet Una gaspingly, with loud cries'.[22] This is a familiar description of a bedside scene. Una spends a long time by the bedside of the dying Monos, mourning for him while others speak in low voices in a

manner of reverence to the dead. The pang of separation suffered both by the dying and the survivors is crystallized in the overt act of mourning. Una and Monos are united in a better world-at the end of the period of waiting, or sleep, or caesura. The words used by Monos to describe 'Una-mine, mine forever now'[23] -signify this union.

The following stories explore the domination/subjugation; subject/object divides, as attempted earlier but with a difference. The objects in these stories, the women, find support from the other characters that help them subvert the balance of power.

Hop-Frog is a tale of vengeance. The autocratic king, like the one in *Scheherazade*, extravagantly displays his power, most of which is directed towards the 'oddities'-his dwarfish and crippled jester Hop-Frog and another dwarfish dancer Trippetta. These two victims of authority, foreigners to the king's court, join hands to overcome their diminutive physical size and acquire mammoth proportions-much too large for even the sovereign to handle.

The position of woman in a man-woman relationship as the dominated is further enhanced in this story because the king is not only the receptacle of power drawn from his gender but also by virtue of the power of the state. In the androcentric world, this embodies supreme power. Trippetta takes the first step towards challenging the power when she dares to go up to the king and asks for his munificence, when he has already ordered Hop-Frog to drink (what Hop-Frog cannot hold), and thereby dampens the pleasure he derives from his joke. The king's display of power is vulgar because he overdoes it. The king did not have to physically assault a menial in order to deny him mercy. This action of the king, which is nothing extraordinary, acquires specialty because it's off the subversive act on the part of Hop-Frog and Trippetta and finally at taking the king's life for his excesses. Hop-Frog, a partner in the Hop-Frog-Trippetta entity, voices his protest when he reminds the king of his dastardly act before he narrates his 'plans of revenge' to the king. The irony is heightened, when the king, unaware of the imminent danger, heartily agrees to Hop-Frog's plan for 'entertainment'. Hop- Frog re-sounds his protest when he mentions that his 'capital diversion'[24] will forward the cause of entertainment by frightening the women. It is a cynical comment, which the king not only misconstrues but also welcomes enthusiastically.

The king here, as in *Scheherazade*, is the Sadeian sovereign man. His concern is to seek pleasure. The violence and violation authored by the king are movements towards the fulfilling of his desires. Since he is the law unto himself, he is not bound by reason. He mocks it. He wastes his power through a vulgar display and in turn weakens himself. The relationship of sympathy and understanding between Hop-Frog and Trippetta is directed towards facing this sovereign onslaught. They try to brook the king's aggression until they are ready to subvert the ways of the tyrant.

Aggression is a part of any state machinery. The king here is no exception. He is sadistic and, therefore, takes great pleasure in torturing his subjects and playing cruel jokes on them. He keeps them under control by inflicting both physical and psychological violence. Humiliation is his major weapon. He never forgets to remind Hop-Frog and Trippetta that they are physically challenged. He uses the fact that they are odd, for his own pleasure. Hop Frog's 'interjectional gait... something between a leap and a wiggle,-afford(s) illimitable amusement, and of course consolation, to the king'[25]. *Hop-Frog* however, is set apart from the rest of Poe's stories because the objects of aggression here, viz. Hop-Frog and Trippetta, are also capable of being aggressive. Their method of taking revenge is a clear case of vengeful destructiveness. Although it is not spontaneously carried out, it is fraught with cruelty and results in the death of the king and his ministers.

Death then is seen as a means to an end-of closure and finality. It also heralds the end of tyranny. The horror of death, however, varies according to perspectives. Here the sovereign does not allot death. His subjects do. For the sovereign, death is tyranny. It is the reversal of all the acts of cruelty that he has perpetrated. For the agents of death, contradictory as it may sound, death is a means to

freedom and justice. Hop-Frog and Trippetta destroy the established law, in order to be able to put an end to the king's tyranny and attain freedom. In many communities the death of the sovereign calls for unfettered violence and transgression. The agents of death here transgress the taboo of death in the backdrop of an extravaganza and create an occasion for the death of the king, subvert the establishment and the power related with it, and earn for themselves their freedom.

The creation of Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin raised quite a storm in the literary firmament in the nineteenth century and made Edgar Poe a popular writer in America and abroad. Dupin imbibes the ratiocinative as well as the intuitive aspects of the human intellect. This rare combination of characteristics makes Dupin not only an ace detective but also a perceptive student of human nature. The three Dupin stories are examples of the detective's ability to study human nature in isolation as well as in relationship with one another.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue initially strikes the reader because it is a very sensitive portrayal of the societal attitudes towards single women. The moment it is realized that robbery is not the motive behind the murders, a kind of uneasiness sets in. The mystery behind the disappearance of the culprit from a closed room is as palpable and arguable as to the question why the L'Espanayes are the victims of such a diabolical murder. It is not a matter of surprise, therefore, that quite a few people are curious about two retired single women. They lock for a motive for the murders and fail to find any. It is only when Dupin concentrates on the lack of motives, that the mystery behind the murders is solved. The common populace is so conditioned to look for only what they should see, or nave been taught to see, that they let important evidence go unseen. Dupin uses his insight and reconstructs for him the entire action of the episode, without being coloured by biases and conventionalities, and gets to the bottom of the mystery. He shows that the L'Espanayes are common ordinary human beings and their brutal murders did not in any way reflect on either their personalities or their lifestyles. The opinion of the people present at the scene of crime revolves around what they have seen and heard. It is their lack of insight that they could not relate the two. They, therefore, give a distorted version of the facts. The victims, who had seen and heard more, are not alive to tell their tales, They have been silenced. it is a point worth noting that the vocal chords of both women are mutilated. Dupin, by identifying simultaneously with the victim as the 'actor', recovers the lost voice and speaks for the women as well as for the 'mute' animal. He shows that society has a potential for violence and Individuals can find themselves quite helpless before its manifestations.

Violence and the erotic are closely related. And so are the erotic and the presence or absence of morality. It leads to the question of taboo. Logically taboos are there to be transgressed. The lack of morality or the presence of the amoral does not signify the presence of the erotic. This is because the erotic is beyond the bounds of morality. The ape belongs to the realm outside human society and is not bound by its codes. By becoming the agent of the action of murder, the ape 'apes' human practices and turns the human world topsy-turvy. The taboo on murder, which controls acts of untrammelled violence, receives a severe jolt. The L'spanayes become victims of a meaningless 'sacrifice,' and the human world stands by watching as a mute observer. It requires a Dupin to show that when human beings give in to the bestial, it constitutes open violation or transgression. When the beast enters the human order, the threat is even greater because it exposes what human civilization tries so hard to keep under cover-its innate vulnerability to violence.

Aggression in animals is a reaction. It is a defence against threats to their lives. Animals usually do not inflict pain to derive any kind of pleasure out of it. Their aggression is not malignant. Animals acquire learned behaviour patterns, as is evident in the case of the ape in the story - it learns to copy the sailor's action and tries to shave itself. The sailor's action of keeping a wild animal under constraints and curtailing it natural instincts is an act of aggression. His sole purpose is to profit from the animal. The tables are turned on the sailor when an apparently harmless act of shaving is learned by the ape and used to perpetrate a horrible 'crime.' The depiction of aggression in

Rue Morgue is a stinging comment on human beings' voluntary denial of the recognition of their own destructive traits. The citizens present at the scene of the crime also, as a matter of routine, start looking for the object that they can hold responsible for sharing this destructive streak in human nature. Edgar Poe, after his own style, does not titillate the question of morality or responsibility more than necessary; he leaves the issue of redressal wide open. It is quite evident that the ape cannot be held responsible for the murders. It was only trying to save itself. The sailor cannot be held responsible either. He had no intentions of murdering any one and though he was present at the scene of crime, and was in fact, an eyewitness the situation was beyond his control. And if one has to question human nature, the debate can continue forever. The repercussions of the episode are, however, disturbing. We are left with two individuals, brutally 'murdered'.

The death of the L'Espanayes is quite unnecessary. It is a pointer to the irrationality of death, and the element of the macabre and morbid related to it. It does not evoke any kind of sentimentality or display of emotions, keeping in view the nineteenth century attitude to death. Instead it evokes horror and disgust. 'Death by murder' outrages the sense of morality and decency. Dupin, as the upholder of the spirit of survival, comes in to redress the 'crime.' The lack of motives behind the murder of the L'Espanayes is an oblique subversion of the dominant social narrative, which seeks to legitimize itself by identifying the subject and object of any action. Dupin cites the 'unnecessary deaths of the L'Espanayes to show that power structures in human relationships embody within themselves the scope for falsification and subversion. The Parisians look for the motive behind the killing and try to identify the crime. Dupin constructs a parallel narrative to show that the dominant narrative though enjoying the backing of the masses, can be proven to have been constructed on a false premise. Hence it can be untrue. The irony of the killing of the L'Espanayes is heightened because this criminal action, though identified, cannot be given a body, and branded.

The Mystery of Marie Roget is again a comment on the way the androcentric world judges the character of a single woman to which the newspapers, the major formulators of public opinion and the mouthpieces of the public, are willing collaborators. The reports about the discovery of a female corpse from the waters of the Seine find it necessary to comment upon the 'virtuous character of the deceased'[26], considered being Marie. They comment upon her coquettish nature but do not find it necessary to highlight the fact that a more respectable gentleman, Monsieur Le Blanc, finds her 'outgoing' nature and physical charm of much use while employing Marie as an attendant in his perfumery. Feminine charm is used literally to entrap the attention of the clientele, comprising people of dubious reputation, who frequent the perfumery. The mother of the grisette finds her daughter's job only partially acceptable, but economic considerations cannot be completely overlooked by her. What is absolutely unacceptable is the twenty-two year old Marie's own 'adventurous' disposition and she is suitably punished with death for transgressing expected behaviour codes. This punishment is considered necessary because Marie's 'exuberance' is uncontrolled and though her mother and employer have tried to cover up for an earlier escapade, Marie has not learnt her lesson. She has not been grateful for the munificence of the society that houses her, and later offers a reward of thirty thousand francs for the identity of the murderer. This sum is considered quite an exaggeration for the redressal of the crime against someone as common as Marie is. She gets accustomed to being used as a sex-symbol or a sign in a semiotic system, and subverts it to her own advantage when she uses her physical charm to seek romantic fulfilment outside the immediate and familiar community. The society aware of her earlier disappearance is quick to seize the opportunity and voice an opinion that Marie has faked her death and passed off another female corpse as her own in order to diffuse 'charges against her chastity'[27]. Although her two suitors, St. Eustache and Monsieur Beauvais are exposed to suspicion, they are quickly exonerated. St. Eustache dies the death of a sentimental hero and Beauvais takes on the mantle of redressing the crime against Marie out of self- righteousness and hence is cleared. None of the identifiable men get implicated seriously. The world safely passes the onus onto the unidentifiable faceless group of gangsters known to perpetrate such crimes. Her corpse is described with clinical precision and

detachment with no attention paid of the pain that she would have suffered while dying. A woman of Marie's notoriety is an object of intellectual arguments and study, not the subject for any kind of sympathy or understanding. But the sympathy is voiced through Dupin, who not only avoids being wholly judgmental but also gives credit to Manes sense of 'reasoning' in planning her elopement and thereby indirectly voicing her desires. He looks for existing social documents, alternative newspaper reports, and gives a face and identity to Marie's murderer from within the same framework, which has so far been operating against her. His understanding of human nature comes to the fore in his comment: 'The chances are ten to one, that he who had once eloped with Marie would again propose an elopement, rather than she to whom proposals of elopement had been made by one individual, should have them made to her by another'[28]. This one statement tilts the balance unarguably in Marie's favour. Marie is punished because she dares to challenge the conventional role of the woman as the object of love, and goes seeking love on her own terms, thereby subverting the conventional power-structure in heterosexual relationships.

If eroticism is assening to life up to the point of death, Marie subscribes to it Iteratim. Though once violated through betrayal, Marie gives priority to her desires, accepts this violation as a part of eroticism, and decides to join her paramour. She is driven by an innerness of desire and bypasses moral considerations because morality is not the aim of eroticism. Marie is aware of her paramour's debaucheries, as it is openly known to all. She seeks union with him and the erotic aspect of her relationship is heightened because she risks it at the cost of the security and social acceptance which the advances of her two other suitors entail. The paramour, on the other hand, refuses to recognize any scope for union. Marie, for him, is just an object of desire, meant to be violated. The demands of an erotic union are far beyond his capacities. He murders Marie so that he does not have to surrender his position of power and can carry on with his libertinage.

The paramour's action symptomizes the malignantly aggressive traits of his personality. Realizing that Marie seeks his love he exerts sadistic control over her, in order to completely dominate her. His betrayal and return signify his cruelty because he sustains the urge to hurt and humiliate her over and over again. His narcissism prompts him to exploit her emotions as he lures her away and takes his revenge for the earlier time when Marie leaves him to return home. These aggressive traits take a turn for the destructive and he finally murders her so that she can never challenge his superiority.

Death in *Marie Roget* is related to the erotic/macabre, the violent and the indecent. The erotic/macabre aspect of death does not, however, aim at the union of the lovers. It originates, in the case of Marie, in her desire for attaining her love, and as an embodiment of lust in case of her paramour. He drives Marie to death in order to derive pleasure, and inflicts limitless violence on her. It is a vulgar display of his power over her and smacks of the indecent. The death of the beloved brings forth no expression of loss because the lover gifts Marie with death in order to complete his domination over her.

The Purloined Letter represents the third rung of society, its handling of women, and interpretations of human relationships. Royally, while enjoying certain privileges, also finds itself bound by other equally distinct restrictions. The loss of the letters not only means personal hazards for the queen but also leaves scope for scandalizing talk about her estate. So her predicaments are manifold. The other complication is caused, in this third of the three Dupin stories, by the sharing of knowledge. In the two stories discussed earlier, knowledge is the priority of only one of the two parties involved. In *Purloined Letter* shared knowledge becomes the cause for much anxiety instead of providing the solutions. The queen is aware of the identity of the minister as the stealer of the letter. In fact, he commits the crime in her presence. The minister on his part is aware of the queen's knowledge of his action. His action acquires dangerous proportions for the queen and the state precisely because of this shared knowledge. Simultaneously, it is also evident that to be able to exert control over the queen, the minister must not share his knowledge, of the existence of the testimony of the queen's covert alliance with the rest of the world. The woman is held prisoner between her own desire, and social structures,

which debar her from crossing over the bounds of marriage. The letter, the phallic symbol as interpreted by psychoanalysis, controls the dynamics of power in the story. The woman has to seek the assistance of the law, in order to prevent the aftermath of her 'breaking the law,' from taking its toll not only on herself but also on society. Dupin as the ratiocinative as well as intuitive individual is called upon in order to restore a balance between desire and law. The letter is also the proof that a woman's desires must be kept concealed and unacknowledged because desire has the potential for transgressing limits; or that woman's desire is, by definition, transgressive.

This transgressive aspect of desire is what gives the queen's unclaimed relationship the flavour of the erotic. Eroticism is amoral. Morality robs eroticism of its essence, which thrives on the difficulties lying in the path towards achieving erotic continuity. In case of the queen, her marriage and the social unacceptability of relations outside marriage are the hindrances. What is overlooked, however, is the transgressive nature of marriage itself. Marriage acts as a constraint in the queen's search for continuity because she is unable of find the fulfilment of her desire in marriage. Her desires are meaningful enough for her to let in one more person into her secret rather than suffer the ignominy of being used as a handle by the minister in his machinations. The minister represents the opinion of the world of work, which makes use of desire but does not respect it. He diverts the role of the queen from being the subject in her relationship outside marriage to being an object of his own desire to control her, and by extension control the transgressive nature of eroticism. A keen observer, he recognizes the handwriting of the sender of the letter and takes upon himself the role of 'judge.' As an extra-marital relationship is a taboo, he, as the mouthpiece of society, upholds the taboo.

The minister inflicts psychological violence in order to exert control over the woman in the story. His sadistic nature prompts him to hurt and humiliate her so that she can never break out of his grasp. His narcissism, and hence sense of superiority, are fed by the power that he enjoys, and in turn encourages him to exert himself even more. He enjoys the knowledge of his ability to make the queen suffer from the anxiety of exposure. He resorts to deception to achieve his ends.

Death is also a form of deception. It cheats human beings out of their lives. Death in *The Purloined Letter* is figurative. Death implies the inability of 'living'. The minister in the story does not want to allow the queen to 'live.' He resorts to deception and tries to suck the life out of her. Dupin subverts his plans. He uses deception to deceive the minister and restore 'life' back in the queen. The forces of death and evil lose the battle they launch by the same rules that they enforce, and life finally triumphs, through the actions of Dupin, in the *'The Purloined Letter'*. The stories analysed, culminating with the analyses of the three Dupin stories, guide one towards the realization that agency or subjectivity forms the mainstay in any human relationship. In a heterosexual relationship the subject-object divide, as is well known, is based on gender. Dupin uses his 'negative capability', re-lives the experiences of the 'objects' in human relationships, transcends the gender divide, and shows that power relationships and notions of gender are more transient than immanent.

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