Poe's Play-Full Narratives

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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe entered the U. S. literary canon mainly on his merits as a short story writer and as the creator of the detective story. Knowledge of his prolific career as editor and literary critic is rather restricted to specialized academic research or the poetics presented in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). Although the French Symbolists rescued his poetry for posterity, the disdain of his contemporary nationals did not provide Poe's poetry with much popular recognition beyond "The Raven." Poe's Gothicism has often obscured the ironic sense of humor that pervades much of his work and which has not received much critical attention until lately.[1] His only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1938), had a similar reception, and even Poe, himself, regarded it poorly. His only interest in drama[2] seems to be restricted to his theater reviews (especially for the *Broadway Journal*) and a failed attempt at completing *Politian* (1835-6), a Jacobean-styled tragedy based on a 1825 true story[3] that he began to publish serially in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Whether it was the bad reviews of the first instalments of *Politian* or the difficulties of producing works for the stage in the U. S. during Poe's lifetime,[4] the truth is that he never made a second attempt to write a play.[5]

And yet drama pervades his both short fiction and his criticism as much as his personal life. Deserted by his father, his mother dying just before his third birthday, separated from his siblings after his mother's death, his foster mother dying, his foster father disinheriting him, his child bride dying, and his own mysterious death all describe a rather melodramatic life. After Poe's death, the melodrama continued with accusations of his being an untaught, cynical, racist, antisocial, addicted and a mentally-ill pervert.[6] But the present article is not concerned with the possible influence and/or use of drama in the perceptions of Poe's personal life,[7] even though these histrionic characterizations have contributed to the popularity of his personal and literary reputation.[8] Rather, this article seeks to show the influence and use of dramatic devices in Poe's literary and critical work. Simple as it might seem—at least when compared to the wide scope of more or less plausible

criticism of Poe's work published so far—an aesthetically-focused reading of his narrative gains force in light of Poe's own critical work. This mostly appeals to formal and technical aspects as they contribute to the literary work as an artistic whole.

Dramatic Elements in Poe's Critical Vision

According to Terence Whalen, having to adapt to the mass-culture publishing format of literary magazines diverted Poe's literary ideals from the search for aesthetic pleasure to the theory of the single effect, including the principles of novelty and length.[9] Although recent criticism is inclined to relate Poe's concern for literary effect as an anticipation of the sociology of literature, reader-response criticism, and open text semiotics by about a century,[10] the influence of the Gothic German and British models on Poe's literary and critical preferences has been extensively recorded.[11] More specifically, A. W. Schelgel's critical work on drama, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809-1811), which relies heavily on his learning on Aristotle's *Poetics* and its impact on European drama, is crucial to understanding the ideas presented in "The Philosophy of Composition."

Aristotle's classical theory of drama not only renders a more plausible explanation for the development of Poe's theory of single effect, a reading of Poe's short stories from the perspective of Aristotelian standards for drama provides a new look at Poe's use of other dramatic devices aimed at the achieving a single effect.[12]

In "The American Drama," Poe attacks Willis' *Tortessa: The Usurer Matched* (1839) for the unnecessarily complicated action that Willis develops in underplots and minor characters. But Poe's critical preference for compositional unity in drama extends to short narrative. In his 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe recommends prose extension to be between half an hour and two hours when read aloud. In "The Philosophy of Composition," he extends this rule to "any literary work" on the assumption that otherwise it would be "deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity of effect." Similar opinions are also expressed in "The Poetic Principle" (1850), where Poe regards "Unity" as "that vital requisite in all works of Art."

The same purpose—"effect of *insulated incident*" (emphais added)— is claimed by Poe to be the reason behind the choice of "the locale" of the action of "The Raven." This should be "a *closed circumscription*" (emphasis added) because it "has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention." Although Poe would immediately rush to claim that this closed circumscription "must not be confounded with mere unity of place," the fact that such an idea might occur to his readers, does certainly account for the similarity having become apparent to him. Interestingly enough, and despite the psychological complexities portrayed in some of Poe's tales, character is subordinate to plot in his narrative. The reduction in character together with restrictions in time and action are characteristics typical of the tale that make it closer to dramatic representation than to the novel as a genre,[13] and that might be explained by the inscription of its origin within the oral tradition.

In fact, a possible relation existing between short narrative and drama has been noticed by many. In short narrative, concentration in length seems to adjust to the representation of situation, of a punctual crisis that parallels the formal restrictions of classical drama in time and action. Cortázar affirms that Poe's tales are intense because they make man face his circumstance in tragic conflicts.[14] Similarly, Guy Rohon[15] establishes a parallelism between classical tragedy and the short novel on the basis that both concentrate on solving a crisis, on the development of a punctual adventure. Finally, Lancelotti argues that "given its form and temporality, the tale is the ideal expression of the situational as the tragic condition of man."[16]

Jeffrey H. Richards notices the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* on Poe's theory of the single effect when he suggests that Poe conceived of literary artifice in dramatic terms:

> As Poe continues, all the false starts, stupid ideas, and discarded "fancies" of the poet would be exposed; suddenly, he concludes, reader spectators would observe, in the language of the stage, "the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting the—step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio.*"[17]

Still, and although Richards mentions Poe's incorporation of "some elements of the theater in his tales and poems,"[18] he restricts his analysis of such influence to Poe's critical work in "The Philosophy of Composition," which is on poetry, and to his conception of literary artifice in dramatic terms.[19] Fagin discards Poe's possible skills as playwright with the argument that his histrionic personality would not allow to "forget himself long enough to construct a play about characters who might take the center of the stage in their own right."[20] Although Pollin contends that the "*theatrical*[23] effects in the poems and tales of Poe" (emphais added) are liable to be originated in the American stage, he does not specify which such effects might be beyond a vague reference to a similar "atmosphere" or the specific similarity of some setting or character.[21]

Apart from the tendency to adjust to the classical rules of dramatic unity that have been related to the idiosyncrasy of the tale, other technical devices typical of drama[22] can be found in Poe's short narratives, such as homodiegesis (understood as a form of direct speech), the presence of textual asides (understood as direct addresses to the reader and out of the fictional level), the description of settings in theatrical terms (as stage directions), the tragic notion of fate, and the choral use of poetry (intradiegetic) for the intensification of the dramatic effect in cathartic terms.

Homodiegesis

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle would distinguish tragedy from other art forms with the basic characteristic that tragedy is represented by "people acting and not by narration," and despite the use of dialogue in epics (including the novel) and poetry, this has undeniably been considered a most typical characteristic of drama over the ages. However, the particular character of the messenger-speeches in classical tragedy starts a controversy about the possible intrusion of narrative in drama that can be traced back at least to Philodemus.[23] Still, Irene J.F. de Jong argues that the homodiegetic nature of Euripidean messenger-speeches excludes them from what Aristotle means by "narrative" (’ ´ π) which is; "the assuming of the role of the narrator by *the poet* (as Homer does in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). This indeed never happens in drama. What can and often does happen—in messenger speeches,

prologues and certain stichomythia—is that dramatic characters tell a story, whereby they assume the role of narrator."[24]

Thus, an extension of de Jong's argument would easily lead to consider homodiegetic narrative outside drama as a dramatic technique that is extrapolated into the merely narrative or epic form. In fact, de Jong's main argument to consider messenger-speeches as intrinsically dramatic can be applied to nearly all of Poe's narrative voices. De Jong considers the Euripidean messenger as one more character—and not merely a projection of the poet—because the focus of the messenger is subjective and partial. She argues that the messenger has an individual personality, interests, and part to play in the plots that distinguish him from the poet's muse-inspired omniscience.[25]

González underlines the prevalence of homodiegesis and internal focalization in Poe's short stories.[26] With the exception of a few of them such as "Metzengerstein" (1832), "King Pest" (1835), "The Mask of the Red Death" (1842), or "The Duc de L'Omelette" (1842), Poe's focalization is rarely external, which certainly contributes to the subjective, partial exposition of the incidents that make the plot but also to a direct construction and presentation of character such as the one that can be found in drama. Basler argues that Poe's stories "move in two planes. There is the story which the narrator means to tell, and there is the story which he tells without meaning to, as he unconsciously reveals himself."[27] Abundant references to this narrator's inability to remember, name, recall, or determine actions and explanations picture him either as a madman, or a drunkard, an opium user, or a mixture of all of them. Narrative uncertainty is used by Poe both to increase the effect of terror in his readers and to underline the partiality and subjectivity of the focalization of incident provided by his narrative voices as characters with a very particular personality.[28]

Asides

Basler's distinction of two planes in Poe's stories can also be related to the application of another dramatic device to the narrative form: the aside. The aside was described by Poe himself as a "folly" that "destroys verisimilitude" ("The American Drama"), which nonetheless, did not prevent him from using them in *Politian*.[29] Whether they are

monological, dialogical or *ad spectatores*, asides tense a little bit too much the invisible film that sustains disbelief by multiplying dramatic dimensions on stage and complicating the relations between them. As a dramatic license, asides "induce a theatrical double vision" that underlines some multidimensionality in theater,[30] and "demarcate theatrical space, isolating but insisting on the simultaneity of several different and very specific interpretive possibilities for the on-stage action."[31] Its desired effect, according to López, is to make the audience "aware of what everyone else [on stage] is missing and o make [them] feel as a result that [they] are getting everything." Whereas in comedy, the presence of multiple simultaneous meanings leads to humorous equivocation;[32] in tragedy, equivocation increases dramatic anticipation in the audience, who perceive the inevitability of the fall of the tragic character.

Patricia S. Finch remarks the potential of the aside in characterization and remarks its contribution to the psychological development of characters in the picaresque novel: "Lazarillo's radical solitude precludes the introduction of an interlocutor with whom he can share these reactions, but they are true 'interior asides,' delivered as direct addresses [...] The use of the aside in the characterization of Lazarillo makes the work much more dramatic than would have been the case had Lazaro simply narrated his past experiences."[33] Most of Poe's narratives share the homodiegetic/autodiegetic focus of the picaresque novel, and also benefit from the dramatic potential of the aside as a means to develop a complex psychological picture of the narrative voice as a character involved in action. The double perspectives, double intentions, or double versions offered by the dramatic aside find a technical parallel in the development of first-person narrative voices that sustain an internal dialogue with themselves or propose the reader multiple interpretations of their commentaries and actions. This narrative "double vision" is particularly obvious in certain tales such as the "Tale-Tell Heart," or "The Imp of the Perverse," but it can be perceived to a certain extent in nearly all of Poe's narratives.

After having methodically planned and successfully accomplished the murder with the careful deliberation to avoid detection, the unpunished murderer and narrator of the *The Imp of the Perverse* confronts his "sentiment of satisfaction" at his "absolute security" with the involuntary, obsessive repetition of the sentence, "I am safe."[34] Initially

only a thought, the sentence becomes first audible "in a low undertone" (3:225) that would later increase into a murmur and finally uttered "half aloud" (3:225) without being noticed by other characters. The narrator would finally make an overt confession, but his musing creates a narrative inter-space that situates him between readers (who know his real fears) and other characters (who are ignorant of them). The narrative voice of "Tale-Tell Heart" does not only distinguish between his true thoughts and what other characters think of him, but he even wonders "Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew*!" (3:797). This address to the reader aside the main narrative line divides the narrative space in two simultaneous realities but also opens a third, metanarrative line that questions the possibility that characters who are included in his story could not perceive it at the same level as he. Like in drama, what could be called the "narrative aside" in Poe's stories, also destroys the *vraisemblance* of their fiction. Lefebvre notices the "metateatrical"[35] dimension conferred to plays by certain asides in which "the comments of a spectator on stage help to characterize the deception as a play within a play."[36] The homodiegetic narrative voice in Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart" is a spectator of the incidents described, but his comments become metanarrative as they show the deception of narrative artifice. This double character of the narrative voice is not only present in his relation with other characters but apparent in the narrator's addresses to the reader as they point to the possibility of a metanarrative reading: "True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and *am*; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them .... I *heard many things in hell*. *How* then, am I mad? Hearken and observe how healthily—*how calmly I can tell* you the whole story .... Now this is the point. You fancy me mad." (3:792, emphasis added)

Just as he makes the police notice the crime he had committed, he makes readers suspect his madness, thus exposing the double nature existing between what he does and what he says. Like in tragedy, the "double vision" of Poe's Gothic tales increases the tragic effect as readers perceive how the main character is either unaware of his own self-deception—which usually takes the form of some kind of mental disorder—, or how other characters are unaware of the real intentions of the main character as he plans—or is led—[37]towards their destruction:

"I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him." (3:792).

Although fully integrated in the text, the asides from the main narrative considered in the examples above are signalled by a significant presence of dashes. Written in the third person and showing an overt comic tone, "The Duc de L'Omelette" signals asides not only with dashes but also with the use of French, which the narrator uses to express the thoughts of the main character in free direct speech: "The Duc had studied under B——, *il avait tué ses six hommes.* Now, then, *il peut s'echapper.* He measures two points, and, with a grace inimitable, offers his Majesty the choice. *Horreur!* His Majesty does not fence!" ((2:36). The effect in this case is hilarious, but the means is the same as in the Gothic tales: the distinction of a discourse that steps aside the main narrative in order to provide the reader with the interior perspective of a character as it differs from the exterior one.

Settings

The interior and the exterior do not always diverge in Poe's narratives. As it concerns settings, Poe uses atmosphere to reinforce the description of his characters' mental states. A study of the use of chromatic references in his narrative shows a clear predilection for black and white, weak illumination, obscurity and a nightly atmosphere;[38] which are meant to reflect not only dark deeds but also crooked minds.[39] Poe's settings are typically portrayed from a static focus, which might be explained by the situational nature of short narrative, which González, Cortázar, Guy Rohon and Lancelotti relate to drama. Action in Poe's narratives is usually described as if occurring within a frame. The characters in his tales do not typically move from one room to another. Instead, what happens when such action is described is that they either enter or exit a particular setting. Specially illustrative of this narrative strategy is the end of "Berenice," when the readers learn that she has been buried alive and later unearthed and her teeth pulled out by her fiancé by means of a servant who reports these events as happening offstage (offsetting).[40] The recourse is typically used in drama for a fast advancement plot or to have the audience supply with imagination what technical resources cannot produce. In Poe's narratives, the device reinforces the climax of their final effect by delaying action to the final moment of *anagnorisis*.

The descriptions of Poe's settings are reminiscent of stage directions, since they usually precede any kind of action. The pattern is followed in most occasions but is perhaps better illustrated in the dinner room of "King Pest the First," which is a two-page long static picture of a mock-allegorical, satirical last supper stage setting that is evocative of fifteen-century representations of the "Dance of Death" both in painting and morality plays. In his short article on the decoration of interiors "The Philosophy of Furniture," Poe criticizes the American lack of taste in furnishing houses and describes the ideal decoration of a room. However, Poe's careful description of every detail of the perfect room ceases to be a description to become something closer to stage directions when elements of action that have nothing to do with decoration are introduced in the picture. Thus, he would describe how "[t]he propietor lies asleep on a sofa—the weather is cool—the time is near midnight. I will make a sketch of the room during his slumber" (2:500-01). The impression is produced that the propietor will wake up as soon as the description is finished, which is what happens in drama when stage directions are completed.

Some of Poe's static outdoor settings have been related to contemporary paintings, such as the tarn in "Usher" and Chapman's 1831 *Dismal Swamp,*[41] which could make the perfect backdrops for the beginning of the tale. However, it could be argued that the static, situational character of Poe's short narratives—which supposedly allows for a connection between these and drama—could not be determined as an element of coincidence for those narratives with outdoor settings where action is more dynamic. Indeed, the vibrating action of "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelström" or "The Man of the Crowd" could be hardly reconciled with the stage. Still, about half of the latter is narrated from the framed focus of "the large bow window of the D—Coffee-House in London" (2:507) and the long persecution of the man of the crowd to and fro in the streets of London is, in fact, a single setting where the different densities of the throng enter and exit the stage at different paces as they furnish it. Similarly, the turmoil of falling down the whirling abysses of "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelström" are, in fact, indoor actions as they happen within a ship, a space that becomes the more claustrophobic by contrast with the vastness of the open space surrounding it. Also, the narrator of "A Descent into the Maelström" makes his audience climb up to "the

summit of the loftiest crag" so that they "might have the best possible view of the *scene* of that event I mentioned" (2:577-78, emphasis added). Thus, the "re-presentation" of the whole of the action can be observed from the static focus of such privileged box. The height of the waves in "MS. Found in a Bottle" blocks the vision of the horizon and restricts the scenery to the ship itself, but when the waves cease as the narrator's mobile focus, he begins to whirl down the iced end of the world, yet he still finds time to describe it in theatrical terms as "a gigantic *amphitheater*" (2:146).

Fate

The narrator of "MS. Found in a Bottle" makes the most of this moment of sustained climax and apparent inertia, and ceasing to consider the prerequisite for *vraisemblance*, he even has some time to write a short reflection on the nature of his destiny. In fact, the notion of fate is one of the most recursive dramatic elements in Poe's fiction. His characters, Cortázar argues "are mannequins, beings pushed by some outer fatalism, like Arthur Gordon Pym, or inner ... and are subject to its special 'perversity.'" [42] González relates the concept of fate in Poe to the scientific determinism against which a reaction is necessary for the fantastic to take place.[43] Such interpretation certainly matches the Romantic spirit of the age, but Poe's characters rather seem inclined to yield to an idea of fate that is interpreted in terms of either perversity or compulsion. All the main characters who more or less overtly confess a crime in Poe's tales portray themselves as the passive victims of some unidentified force that is finally revealed and accepted to be part of their own nature.

This force typically takes the shape of some kind of intoxication (usually opium or alcohol), like in "The Black Cat," "Ligeia," or "Berenice;" but also of mental disease under many different forms or even of a devilish doppelgänger.[44] Madness is proposed to be the cause of the narrator's weirdest behavior in "The Tell-Tale Heart," or "The Imp of the Perverse." The first-person narrators in "Berenice" and "Ligeia" claim to be the victims of both hereditary madness and intoxication. William Wilson is haunted by his exact double. "The Imp of the Perverse" begins with a reflection on phrenology that opposes human freewill to a definition of "destiny" (3:1220) in direct relation

to some unidentified "Deity," and which is finally referred to as "the consumation of my fate" (3:1226) at the end of the tale. In "William Wilson," the classical idea of fate is opposed to the Christian notion of sin in the main character's attempt to exculpate himself from his errors: "I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of *fatality* amid the wilderness of error" (2:427). Finally, the narrator of "Morella" feeling no other affection that friendship for his wife and arguing that he "never spoke of love, or dreamed of passion;" claims that it was "Fate [which] bound us together at the altar" (2:225).

It could be argued that the mere idea of fate does not constitute a dramatic reference *per se* since it is also a typical epic feature. However, some of the above-mentioned tales incorporate the undeniably dramatic component of fate: the hero's final recognition and acceptance of fate or *anagnorisis.* Such is the case in "Berenice." Although its first-person narrator obviously knows the end of the story he is telling, he decides to narrate it as he experienced it when it happened and not as he later learned that it occurred. Therefore, the tale is intentionally dramatic in the presentation of events, which reach their climax as they are learned by the main character and not according to the temporal sequence in which they took place. Indeed, Poe's texts can get so self-conscious of the inevitability of fate that they make recognition and acceptance of fate not the effect but the cause of action. The narrators of "The Black Cat," "The Tale-Tell Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse" remark that in spite of their criminal success in hiding all traces of their crimes, they cause their deeds to be exposed as they are led by either euphoria or perversity. In confessing their crimes, these characters do not only accept their fate but are revealed their true nature as criminal *characters*: actors in a plot they cannot help but perform and narrators of a story they cannot help but narrate.

Chorus

A deep sense of fate pervades the death of the lady Ligeia in the homonymous tale. As she grew ill, the narrator, her husband, "saw that she *must* die" (2:316, emphasis added) and to please her last will shortly before her death, he would recite the poem "The Conqueror Worm," a

reflection on the inevitability of death. As an insertion of a poem within a tale, "The Conqueror Worm" is—if not common—by no means an exception in Poe's short narrative or even nineteenth-century narrative in general. "The Haunted Palace" is also inserted in "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Assignation" (1832)[69] includes "To One in Paradise." Buranelli explains such poetic insertions in the narrative text with the argument that "Poe's stories are sometimes similar to his poems in tone, mood, and events; and in some cases he introduces his poetry into his stories to add to the effect."[70] However, the consideration of effect as a possible explanation of the presence of poems in Poe's tales meets the impediment of Poe's own critical approach to the different genres. In the Platonic fashion of "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe distinguishes Beauty as the intended effect of poetry in contrast with Truth and Passion, which he identifies as the object of prose. Although he considers the possibility that Truth and Passion could be used in poetry to "aid the general effect, as do discords in music;" he never mentions the possibility that poetry could help to elicit Truth or Passion in prose, or that prose could have Beauty as an intended effect that a poetic insertion would add to.

González makes a more general assertion in this direction by assimilating the nature of the tale to that of poetry as literary genres, which in his opinion, would explain the presence of poems in Poe's tales.[46] There is an insight into Poe's critical views in this argument as concerns the appropriate length of a literary composition in relation with the effect it seeks to produce in its readers. However, the fact that both a poem and a tale can be short does not account for the presence of poems in Poe's tales. A possible explanation might be found in an assimilation of what Poe considered to be the role of the refrain within the poem to the possible function of a poem within a tale. Poe argues that in composing "The Raven," a key-note was needed to sustain the whole structure of the poem. The refrain, he continues, would work as "some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn," and most interestingly, he refers to it as an artistic point "in the theatrical sense."

A similar function has been attributed to the chorus in Greek tragedy; namely, that it was used "to elevate commonplace details into universal verities," or "transform the passions of the characters, which are necessarily diffused, into sharp focus.[47] In fact, Poe's choice of Beauty

as the most appropriate effect for poetry was based on its universality. Still, if an attempt at explaining the presence of poems in Poe's tales from a dramatic perspective might not sound too convincing from Poe's critical point of view, an analysis of both the poems and the narrative contexts where they are inserted certainly shows that the choral dimension was part of Poe's narrative design.

"The Haunted Palace" for instance, is inserted in "The Fall of the House of Usher" not as a poem but as the "rhymed verbal improvisations" of one of the musical compositions (or "rhapsodies" as the narrator calls them using the Greek term) that Roderick Usher played on his guitar. The musical element and the presence of improvisation add to the poem's reflection on madness as the cause of the fall of the Usher family and house. The poem itself does not only tell a tragic plot (the dooming of a happy kingdom) but even includes a chorus that sings to the happiness of the king before he is doomed: "A troop of Echoes, whose sweet duty/ Was but to sing,/ In voices of surpassing beauty,/ The wit and wisdom of their king" (2:407). In the following stanza, when strange forces attack the kingdom, the third-person poetic voice suddenly turns into a first-person plural[48] to lead the audience's response to the action, which is another of the functions traditionally attributed to the chorus:[49] "But evil things, in robes of sorrow,/ Assailed the monarch's high estate./ (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow/ Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)" (2:407).

In "The Assignation," "To One in Paradise" is written "towards the end of the third act" of a play. The play is "Politian's beautiful tragedy 'The Orfeo,'" whose effect on the composer of the poem caused him to blot it with tears. The poem is relevant in terms of its contribution to the development of the plot, since it reveals the nature of the relationship between the mysterious gallant who wrote it and the beautiful Marchesa Aphrodite, "the young wife of the old and intriguing Mentoni" (2:152). The characters in this tale are so plain and stereotyped (the young couple of lovers, the old, mean husband) as to justify a comparison with the masked characters of Greek drama or the flat characters of Poe's contemporary melodrama. Finally, and most illustrative of all, is "The Conqueror Worm," in "Ligeia." This poem describes the representation of the tragedy "Man," some kind of allegorical play that is attended by "An angel throng," and describes theatrical details of the representation

such as the orchestra, the performance of mimes and puppets, or the scene. The poetic voice, like the poet of Greek tragedy, takes part in most of the activities of this dramatic representation:[80] it tells the plot, performs as chorus leader ("That motley drama!—oh, be sure!/It shall not be forgot! [...] But see, amid the mimic rout/A crawling shape intrude!") (2:318), and directs action by half describing, half instructing when to turn lights out ("Out-out are the lights-out all!"), or let the curtain fall ("The curtain, a funeral pall,/Comes down with the rush of a storm —") (2:319). The poem is inserted in a most appropriate moment for the development of plot since it adds dramatic dimension right before the death of lady Ligeia in the following paragraph. Thus, the insertion of these poems in Poe's tales contribute to the intensification of their thematic climax by bringing into sharp focus the passions of the characters but also by leading the readers' cathartic responses to the development of action.

A Word on Melodrama

Finally, a study of Poe's use of dramatic features in his narratives could not be complete without a reference to one of the most popular dramatic manifestations of his time: melodrama. The general vision that causes Walters' vague mention of "the ingredients of a conventional Gothic melodrama"[51] in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is better justified by other thematic, stylistic, and contextual similarities that Martini attributes to an intertextual relation existing between melodrama and journalistic and literary narratives: "*De tradición popular, la narración policial revela sus intertextos, los relatos de terror, de lo sobrenatural, de aventuras y el mismo melodrama sentimental.*" Except for melodrama, the list seems to be a catalogue of Poe's narrative production. Martini justifies this connection by the common organization of all of these narratives in the binary structure that confronts Good and Evil. Their characters, she argues, divide society between "*lúcidos y torpes, criminales y normales, víctimas y victimarios.*"[52] All of them also share the characteristic of being aimed at the popular masses.

Although Massielo's account of melodrama as "the trope that joins periodical and literary discourses" refers to late nineteenth-century Latin-American productions, her depiction of typically melodramatic

features as they influence the literature and newspapers of the period decidedly portrays some characteristics that would also describe Poe's narratives, to some extent. Concerning subject matter, Massielo mentions "the perversity of gender relations as the *sine qua non* of fiction," and a taste for exoticism, delinquency, horror and violence.[53] As for style, she attributes the hyperbolic tone of yellow-press, serialized stories to the influence of melodrama as it is often characterized by "its linguistic extravagance." To Massielo, melodrama is responsible for the insertion of "a hyperbolic register" into nineteenth-century fiction, which she argues, "discovers the limits of language and marks the very essence of theatricality."[54]

Still, all of these similarities between melodrama and nineteenth-century journalistic and literary narratives can be found to follow the reverse path, or at least to account for the partaking of some contemporary *Zeitgeist* that involved sensationalism in both form and content. Therefore, the presence in Poe's narratives of elements such as hyperbolic, or even affected expression,[55] the thematic preference for exoticism, terror, violence, delinquency or the supernatural, and a certain tendency for Manichaean division between Good and Evil and its consequent simplification of character development[56] can be attributed to the popular tastes of a reading public that also attended melodramatic representations. Other sources, such as the influence of German Gothic tales could merit the same consideration and have already been more largely and justifiably accounted for.

Conclusion

"When Poe philosophized," Walters argues, "all of the arts were woven into the same related fabric. A painting was conceived as a musical composition, music described as a picture."[57] In fact, it is not difficult to find in the same passage of a tale, instances of Poe's juxtaposition of different artistic compositions whose relatedness adds their individual effects for a reinforcement of the general one. Such is the case of "The Fall of the House of Usher," where references to Fuseli's (and descriptions of Roderick's) paintings are juxtaposed to the musical and poetic composition of "The Haunted Palace" mentioned above, and to philosophical considerations or a suggestive list of literary and non-literary readings. Similarly, the secret chamber where the narrator of

"The Assignation" is introduced represents the character of its owner in artistic terms that mix painting, sculpture, and diverse elements of furniture and decoration. In "The Philosophy of Furniture," Poe would add music and architecture to the list and the whole composition is considered to appeal to the eye of the artist, since "all varieties of art" are regulated by the same "undeviating principles" (2:497).

Perhaps Walters' considerations should also—and more specifically—be extended to the weaving of narrative and dramatic devices in Poe's tales. The question addressed in this article is not concerned with the fact of whether Poe was consciously introducing dramatic elements in his tales as part of some philosophy of narrative composition whose procedure he might later describe in detail. It rather directs attention to the fact that such elements are intently used, in varying degrees of Poe's awareness of their dramatic quality, with the purpose of contributing to the intended effect of each tale. Although Poe distinguishes different effects for different literary formats, the means to achieve such effects seem to circulate freely among the different genres. The influence of dramatic devices in Poe's short narrative does not always have the same dramatic effect as those devices would have in a play. Certainly, neither do such devices as used by Poe, adjust to the formal requirements they have to meet in drama. Yet their potential to appeal to the sensibility of his readers and to adapt to the narrative format seems to have been sensed by Poe as a means to enhance the artistic effect of his works.

Despite its commitment with Aristotelian mimetic standards concerning plot design and development, or verisimilitude in action and character, Poe's tales also contain an uncanny element that revolves against classical notions of mimesis.[58] Esslin's reference to gothic tales[59] as a non-dramatic source of the Theatre of the Absurd[60] might gain a different perspective if the typically dramatic techniques used by Poe in his short fiction are found to constitute the link that would make such influence possible in Poe's case. Further research on this intertextual dialogue could not only allow for a reading of Poe's short narrative from an absurdist perspective, but also reveal a latent contribution of the dramatic elements present in Poe's stories to the development of later theatrical forms such as the Theatre of the Absurd.

Notes

1. Jeffrey H. Richards, "Poe, *Politian*, and the Drama of Critique." *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 3.2 (2002): 3-27, 22.

2. T.H. Ellis gives an account of Poe's Thespian performances as a boy in Richmond, but this early attraction to drama must be regarded a mere distraction. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe. A Critical Biography*. New York & London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941.

3. *Politian* is based on the Beauchamp-Sharp affair that was to be known as "The Kentucky Tragedy." Due to its melodramatic character, the events were widely reported all over the country in diverse journals such as *Niles' Weekly Register* in Baltimore and inspired several literary productions apart from Poe's. William Kimball, "Poe's Politian and the Beauchamp-Sharp Tragedy." *Poe Studies* 4.2 (1971): 24-27, Bruce Dickinson, *The Kentucky Tragedy: A Story of Conflict and Change in Antebellum America.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006; Matthew Schoenbachler, *Murder and Madness: The Myth of the Kentucky Tragedy*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009. Despite the many literary and non-literary works inspired by this case previously to Poe's play, T. O. Mabbott reduces Poe's sources for *Politian* to chapter xxxiv of Charles Fenno Hoffman's *Winter in the West* (1835) and two pamphlets from 1826: *The Confession of Jeroboam O. Beauchamp* and *Letters of Ann Cook, late Mrs. Beauchamp, to her Friend in Maryland*, none of which were written for the stage. *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969, 1:243-244.

4. Amy Branam, "*Politian*'s Significance for Early American Drama." *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 8.1 (2007): 32-46, 33; Arthur Hobson Quinn. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, 13.

5. Fagin discards Poe's three "dialogues" ("The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" and "The Power of Words") as dramatic expressions because they "are interesting as poetic prose, as philosophy, as mysticism, but they are hardly significant as drama." Fagin, Nathan Fagin, *The Histrionic Mr. Poe.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1949, 70. However, T. O. Mabbott describes Poe's narrative in "The Tall-Tale Heart" as a "masterly prose mono-drama" (1: 241), which is suggestive of the influence of dramatic devices in Poe's short narrative.

6. Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Philosophy of Composition." In *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Robert Regan. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967, 15-30, 29.

7. Although his biological parents had been professional actors, the impact of this fact in the later development of his literary style has never been established. He was certainly aware of his origins, but the early age at which he was orphaned could not make this influence possible except for a certain kind of imagined, mournful remembrance of his mother. For an analysis of Poe's life in comparison with his work, see Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe. Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992. For a detailed account of the professional career of Eliza Poe, see Geddeth Smith, *The Brief Career of Eliza Poe.* Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988.

8. Fagin, 2.

9. Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America*. Princeton University Press, 1999, 83.

10. Ugo Rubeo, "In the Sign of Saturn: Norm and Transgression in Poe's Writings." (Lecture presented at the International Bicentennial Poe Conference: *The Long Shadow of a Tormented Genius,* held in Cáceres, Spain, Nov. 2009), 6.

11. Albert Lubell, "Poe and A. W. Schlegel." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 52.1 (1953): 1-12. Roger Asselineau. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970; Benjamin F. Fisher, "Poe and the Gothic Tradition." In *The Cambridge Companion to E A Poe*. Ed. Kevin J. Hayes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 72-91.

12. With respect to this, Eco does not hesitate to relate Poe's concern for the unity of impression to Aristotelian poetic principles and even suggests that the ambiguous fluctuation between Poetics and Criticism in "The Philosophy of Composition" is typically Aristotelian. Such ambiguity might serve as authorization that justifies my use of Poe's own artistic precepts for the analysis of his artistic practice. Umberto Eco, *Sobre Literatura.* Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, 2005, 249-251, 261.

13. M. A. González-Miguel, *E.T.A. Hoffman y E.A. Poe. Estudio comparado de su narrativa breve.* Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, Secretariado de Publicaciones e Intercambio Editorial, 2000, 61, 106.

14. J. Cortázar, "El poeta, el narrador, el crítico." In *Poe: Ensayos y críticas*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1973, 13-61, 36.

15. In González, 56.

16. My translation from the original: "por su forma y temporalidad, el cuento es el asiento ideal de la situación, de esa condición trágica del hombre." Mario A. Lancelotti, *De Poe a Kafka: para una teoría del cuento*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1968, 17. However, the typically Romantic, fluctuant vision of literary genres must have reached Poe via Schlegel (Lecture ii).

17. Richards, 6.

18. Richards, 3.

19. "For Poe, the entire theory of effect is essentially a theatrical one [...] The writer is a *histrio*, a word that contains the ideas both of actor and complete person of the theater—scene-setter, stage manager, prompter" (Richards, 6).

20. Fagin, 69.

21. Pollin rather concentrates on the particular literary influence of an adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* to the Philadelphia stage in "The Mask of the Red Death" and not to the influence of its dramatic quality on the narrative frame of the tale. Burton R. Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970, 1-2, 5, 9.

22. Although he refers to Poe's adaptability to the stage rather than to Poe's use of typically dramatic devices, McGowan notices some similarities existing between Poe's narrative and Noh theatre that allow for a smooth transition from Poe's narrative into Tate's one-act plays. Among those characteristics he mentions length, character/plot simplicity and the choral function, which are more deeply discussed in the present article. (Tony McGowan. "Preface"). In Lance Tait, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Plays*. Enfield: Enfield Publishing Company, 2005. Andrew Sutherland's introduction to Tait's plays also refers to the "dramatic elements" of Poe's tales, but vaguely lists them as "strong characters, singular images and striking scenery."

23. James Barret, *Staged Narrative: Poetics and the Messenger in Greek Tragedy.* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, 69-70.

24. Irene J.F. De Jong, *Narrative in Drama: The Art of the Euripidean Messenger-speech.* Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1991,117.

25. De Jong, 65-72.

26. González, 84.

27. Roy Basler, "The Interpretation of Ligeia." In *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Richard Regan. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967 51-63, 56.

28. In his review *Southern Literary Messenger,* (September 1836) of Bird's novel, *Sheppard Lee*, Poe discusses the technique of "avoiding ... *directness* of expression ... and thus leaving much to the imagination" as a means to "give verisimilitude to a narration" (Mabbott, 2:xxii).

29. As concerns the break of verisimilitude produced by asides, Poe rhetorically asks: "why should an author have to be told, what the slightest reflection would teach him, that an audience, by dint of no imagination, can or will conceive that what is sonorous in their own ears at the distance of fifty feet cannot be heard by an actor at the distance of one or two?" ("The American Drama"). Willis, whose play is the target of such attack, could have easily replied that an actor's deafness to hear asides can only be compared to his blindness to perceive the audience through the invisible "fourth wall."

30. Niall W. Slater, *Plautus in Performance: The Theater of the Mind.* Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000, 137.

31. López, 56.

32. López, 57, 64.

33. Patricia S. Finch, "The Uses of Aside in *Celestina.*" *Celestinesca* 6.2 (1982): 19-24, 5.

34. E. A. Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.* Ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott. Cambridge: Harvard University Presss, 1969, 3: 225. All references to Poe's tales are from the Mabbott edition and noted parenthetically.

35. Eckard Léfebvre, "Asides in New Comedy and the Palliata." *Leeds International Classical Studies* 3.3 (2003-4): 1-16, 5.

36. Lefevre quotes from J. C. B. Lowe, "The *virgo callida* of Plautus' Persia." *CQ* 39 (1989): 390-9, 395-6.

37. Rather than assuming responsibility for their actions, the narrative voices/ main characters in Poe's Gothic tales often reject responsibility for their crimes by presenting themselves as the victims of fate—a characteristic that is often related to and explained by a "doubleness" in their personality reflected in the "narrative aside."

38. Debra A. Castillo, “Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art.” In *New Essays on “The Crying of Lot 49.”* Ed. Patrick O’Donnell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 21-46, 45-46.

39. Cagliero remarks Poe’s use of the term “house” with the double sense of “family name” *(genus)* and building *(domus)* in “The House of Usher” and “The Cask of Amontillado.” The house where the photophobic Chevaliere Dupin leads a retired life and “exercises his powers of reasoning” is characterized by “darkness, silence, and sparse furnishing.” Roberto Cagliero. “Poe’s Interiors: The Theme of Usurpation in ‘The Cask of Amontillado.’” *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 2.1 (2001): 30-36.

40. In narrative, action occurring offsetting is achieved by a shift in the narrative voice; which changes from the first to the third person.

41. Walters, 66.

42. Cortázar, 20. My translation from the original: “*son maniquíes, seres empujados por una fatalidad exterior, como Arthur Gordon Pym, o interior* [...] *y están sometidos a su especial ‘perversidad.’ ”*

43. González, 95.

44. In the case of double characters in Poe’s narratives (“William Wilson” is the most paradigmatic, but many others have been extensively analyzed as literary doubles), it is interesting to note Herdman’s study of doubles in nineteenth-century fiction. He relates the fateful connection that tragically leads individuals towards a destructive encounter with their doppelgängers to the Calvinist doctrine of election. John Herdman. *The Double in Nineteenth-Century Fiction.* London: MacMillan, 1990, 4-9.

45. Buranelli, 88.

46. González, 73.

47. Albert Weiner, “The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus.” *Theater Journal* 32.2 (1980): 205-212, 206. Poe was familiar with Schlegel’s interpretation of the function of the chorus in Ancient Greek tragedy, which is expressed in rather similar terms: “The chorus is the ideal spectator. It mitigates the impression of a heart-rending or moving story, while it conveys to the actual spectator a lyrical and musical expression of his own emotions, and elevates him to the region of contemplation” (Lecture v).

48. Bacon counts the "alternation between 'I' and 'we'" among the "characteristics of choral songs" (9).

49. Weiner, 206.

50. "Words, melody, and dance, when not part of a public oral tradition, were all the province of the poet, who componed both words and music for solo and choral songs, choreographed the dances, trained the choruses, and often performed with them as chorus leader, or in drama as an actor" (Bacon, 14).

51. Walters, 2.

52. Martini, 2.

53. Massielo, 271.

54. Massielo, 272.

55. Castillo, 114.

56. Buranelli, 67.

57. Walters, 70.

58. His characters are constructed with subtle complexity, while remaining the mechanical puppets of a force somewhat between fate and unconscious imperatives. His themes range from the mannerisms of "Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling" to the existential crypticism of "Silence" and "Shadow," or the grotesquery of "Epimanes." His strictly rational introductory digressions often degenerate into incoherence (beginning of "The Tell-Tale Heart"), parody ("Peter Pendulum," "Raising the Wind"), dreams ("The Unparalleled Adventure of Hans Pfaall") or nightmares ("The Angel of the Odd," "The Bargain Lost").

59. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Pelican Books, 1972).

60. The last parts of "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Cask of Amontillado" are particularly reminiscent of Pinter whereas "Lionizing" or "Loss of Breath" may bring to mind some scenes by Becket, just to mention a couple of examples.