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**Historicizing the Gothic: Political and Cultural Implications  
in Edgar Allan Poe's Tales**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most controversial American literary figures, Edgar Allan Poe has always attracted considerable attention from both critics and readers alike. Due to his allegedly eccentric personality and the dubious circumstances surrounding his death, the public perception of the writer has often been somewhat mythologized. When it comes to his works, Poe has been both critically acclaimed and disparaged, both acknowledged and disputed, but rarely ignored. As he left behind a significantly influential literary legacy, his place among the most important writers in American literature is today undeniable.

Being both a journalist and a fiction writer, Poe produced numerous texts ranging from tales and poems to critical essays, reviews and newspaper articles. As such a versatile author, today he is credited with popularizing the American short story and inventing the detective genre (Sova vii). Although he wrote across multiple genres, including science fiction, detective stories, parodies and humorous pieces, Poe gained vast popularity mostly because of his tales of horror that are heavily imbued with Gothic imagery.

For a long time, critics read Poe's Gothic tales solely in terms of their aesthetic value. In other words, much of the scholarly interpretation of his works revolved around his art as such, with little or no consideration of the historical context of his life. However, in the last several decades, there has been a shift towards a new way of reading Poe – not as an aesthete unconcerned with history, but as an author whose fiction responds to the social issues of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. In this thesis, eight of Poe's tales will be analyzed within the framework of this critical approach that historicizes his fiction, acknowledging its subtextual undercurrent. More specifically, rather than be taken at face value as mere Gothic tales that employ the typical elements of the genre, the chosen tales will be read as more or less subtle literary accounts of the politically and culturally turbulent time in which Poe created his fiction.

In order to provide such an analysis, the spatiotemporal frame of Poe's life and literary career needs to be historically contextualized. Born in 1809 and died in 1849, the writer lived during the antebellum period that was deeply marked by many political conflicts and disturbances. It was a time when the nation's official politics, resting on the ideology of American exceptionalism and white Anglo-Saxon superiority, exercised its imperialistic power by means of territorial expansion and racial oppression. As Poe wrote his fiction in such a context, many of the major socio-historical events and political issues are implicitly reflected and criticized in his tales. For the purpose of revealing and analyzing them, they will first be mentioned and explained at the beginning of this thesis. Therefore, the first chapter will contain a brief historical overview of the antebellum America, referring to the principles of American imperialism, Jacksonian democracy, Manifest Destiny, and other concepts that are relevant for the subsequent analysis of the chosen tales. Most notably, the chapter will deal with the issue of race in relation to the treatment of both Native Americans and African Americans within the respective contexts of Indian removal and slavery.

When it comes to Poe's opinions on the social issues of his day, there has never existed a scholarly consensus. Whereas some critics regard him as a proslavery racist, others defend him as being sympathetic to slaves and critical of his country's politics. As the writer himself never openly expressed his political attitudes, it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to unambiguously pinpoint his opinions on the matters containing racial implications. Moreover, as Poe used to be denied a place in the American literary canon, the problems arise not only in relation to his political but also to his literary positioning. The problems of Poe's placement are important in regard to reading his fiction, so they will be presented and explained in the following chapter, which will also deal with different ways of interpreting the works by the controversial writer.

Since Poe was a self-proclaimed aesthete, the majority of literary critics used to interpret his works as being completely devoid of historical influences. However, as already mentioned, in recent years scholars have begun historicizing his fiction and searching for the aesthetic elements and literary tropes that serve as metaphors for the social issues of the antebellum period. Following Toni Morrison's concept of the "Africanist presence", this alternative critical approach is mostly concerned with finding and analyzing racial codes and signifiers that pertain to the different ways in which the issue of race is explored in Poe's works. Moreover, many of these critics now believe that Poe not only subtly reflected the social problems of his day, but also mocked and criticized the ideological principles of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. In that sense, the mentioned chapter will also provide an explanation as to why Poe concealed his real attitudes behind the Gothic metaphors in his fiction.

Within the interpretative framework of reading Poe in a historical context, the next chapter will bring the analysis of the following eight tales: "Some Words with a Mummy", "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains", "The Man That Was Used Up", "The Gold-Bug", "Hop-Frog", "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether", "The Black Cat", and "The Premature Burial". The common denominator and the central point of examination in all the tales is the issue of race. In the process of analyzing the tales, it will be shown how Poe both echoed and criticized many aspects of his country's politics and culture, often referring to the oppression of both Indians and black slaves. More specifically, it will be illustrated how his tales subtly respond to the issues of slavery and Indian removal within a broader context of American imperialism. Finally, the aim of this thesis is to prove that, in an attempt to historicize the Gothic, it is possible to reveal many cultural and political implications that are hidden behind different literary tropes and symbols in Poe's fiction.

## 2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF POE'S LIFE

Known as the antebellum period, the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a politically and culturally turbulent time in American history. Living and creating his fiction in that context, Poe witnessed many major socio-historical events and movements that shaped the society of his day. As Carboni observes, “the years of Poe’s life were, for the United States, the years of deep transformation” (XI). Heavily marked by both external and internal conflicts – the War of 1812, the sectional dispute over slavery, the Indian Wars, the annexation of Texas, and the invasion of Mexico – those years were both deeply transformative and patently violent. Much of that violence, though hidden behind Gothic metaphors, is echoed in Poe’s tales. In that sense, Kennedy points out that

[w]e need to remind ourselves that he produced his violent fiction in the 1830s and 1840s, when the U.S. government was either confining Indians to reservations, ‘removing’ them west of the Mississippi, or ... remorselessly decimating them; this was the same era when the perpetuation and extension of slavery were being defended by Southern apologists and challenged by abolitionists determined to expose the barbarities of the ‘peculiar institution’. (*Historical Guide* 5)

Both slavery and Indian removal occurred as widely harmful consequences of 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideology of American exceptionalism and accompanying territorial expansionism.

Following the purchase of Louisiana in 1803, the United States began their westward expansion. Driven by the ideas of their political and moral superiority, Americans believed they were destined by God to spread their freedom and democratic institutions across the continent. Those notions emerged during the period known as Jeffersonian democracy, as Thomas Jefferson envisioned the States as an agrarian society that would rest on the grounds of equality and individualism, and encouraged territorial growth. The concept that provided

such official justification for the appropriation of the “uncivilized” land was later termed “Manifest Destiny”. Although coined in 1845 during the debate over the Texas annexation, the concept was already existent in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Erkkila 61).

However, America’s territorial claims came at no small price since the continent had already been inhabited by its indigenous peoples. Conveniently, in 1830 – during the presidency of Andrew Jackson who supported the settlement of the West – the Congress passed the so-called Indian Removal Act that “authorized the ‘transfer’ of eastern Indian tribes to lands west of Mississippi” (Kennedy, *Historical Guide* 26). While most Native Americans agreed to peaceful evacuation, the aggressive colonial settlement soon elicited resistance in some tribes, which resulted in the Indian Wars of the 1830s. As Blake reports, without any hesitation, the US government deployed troops across the region in order to forcefully deprive Indians of their land. This set off conflicts such as The Black Hawk War, in which the US military prevented the Sac and Fox Indians to reclaim their Illinois territories. In the process, many Indians were slaughtered, and they decreased in number profoundly. Even more violent was the second Seminole War in the South, as the members of different Seminole tribes refused to leave their homeland in Florida. Lasting for seven years, the war resulted in as many as three thousand deaths of the Seminole Indians (330-31).

Supported by the principles of Jacksonian democracy, America’s territorial expansion extended well into the 1840s. Being an ardent believer in Manifest Destiny, the president John Tyler secured the passing of The Treaty of Annexation that would later, during the presidency of the Democrat J.K. Polk in 1845, lead to the incorporation of Texas into the United States. The annexation resulted in tense diplomatic relations with Mexico, whose government disputed the legitimacy of their territory being subtracted. Eventually, the pro-expansionist Polk oversaw the invasion of Mexico, resulting in the Mexican-American War that lasted between 1846 and 1848 (Kennedy, “Mania for Composition” 11-13).

As a relatively young democracy, the United States were eager to solidify their political power and build a territorially large nation that would support their self-importance. However, their westward movement was in large part economically driven and should thus be regarded within the context of slavery – “the peculiar institution” that significantly marked the antebellum period. Stemming from the colonial times, the culture of slave exploitation played a major role in the economy of the Southern states, which mostly depended on the production of cotton as its chief commodity. Following the 1793 invention of the cotton gin which revolutionized agriculture, Negroes were increasingly forced to cultivate land and harvest crops on southern plantations, and their labour proved indispensable to cotton production (Carboni XII). As the cotton industry blossomed, so did the need for new plantation land. Therefore, the removal of Indian tribes also pertained to the economic interests of southern plantation owners and enabled the spread of slavery in the region (Rodriguez 110).

As Carboni notes, “[b]efore Poe’s birth, the Southern States ... had developed an identity, a culture and economic interests that were significantly different from the Northern States” (XVII). Within the context of the Industrial revolution and consequent urbanization, the Northern states evolved into a strong economy reliant on technology and manufacturing of goods. This shift in production practices required a new traffic infrastructure, so many roads and railways were built for the transport of marketable goods. During the 1830s, as Andrew Jackson encouraged a *laissez faire* approach, America became a strong industrial power shaped by the market forces and the developing capitalist economy (Kennedy, *Historical Guide* 33). At that time, as Rodriguez reports, many Enlightenment ideas such as justice and liberty had been circulating among political and intellectual elites; however, the South was still caught up in its old traditional ways (121). While the War of 1812 finally produced a completely independent nation of free citizens, the plantation system and chattel slavery in the South proved that 19<sup>th</sup>-century America was a country of deep political contradictions.

America's grandiose project of building a politically exceptional nation involved banishing Indians, usurping Mexican territory and exploiting Negroes. Therefore, its imperialistic power needs to be regarded in relation to the mistreatment of non-white people. However, in order to account for such racial oppression, the US political elite needed to produce a plausible justification. For that purpose, as Rowe observes, the public discourse of the time widely designated the white Anglo-Saxon race as supreme to all others – to blacks, to Indians, to Mexicans. With such an ideology of white supremacy, the United States created a suitable climate for the invasion of Mexico, Indian Removal, and, most notably, slavery (85).

As Rodriguez notes, the institution of slavery was defended from many angles. Since the concept of race figured as the distinguishing mark between white owners and black slaves, Africans were, pseudo-scientifically, often declared as belonging to a biologically inferior race. Accordingly, they were deemed mentally deficient, and thus fit for physical work and slavery. Many pseudoscientific currents of the time enunciated the belief that race was a natural given, instead of a social construct, supporting the political and cultural narrative that justified racial oppression. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, racism was deeply entrenched in the pores of American society, and non-white races were conveniently seen as "the other" (116-17).

Apart from racial superiority, Rodriguez reports other reasons within the proslavery argument. Politically, slavery was legitimized as a cultural heritage that lies at the core of the American social order. Without it, as many southern apologists reasoned, the order would collapse. Economically, slave labour was found essential to market production and gaining profit. From a religious standpoint, the defenders of the institution saw it as a moral necessity justified by the words of the Bible. Many southerners also found their justification of slavery in the paternalistic argument that black slaves, being equivalent to helpless children, needed white owners' guidance and supervision. Overall, in the American South, slavery was considered benevolent, morally legitimate and, above all, absolutely necessary (117-21).

Whereas the Northern states abolished slavery in 1804, the South was, during Poe's life, very much defined by the peculiar institution. However, not all Americans advocated its existence and, in the antebellum period, many abolitionist groups sought to terminate slavery altogether. With its grounds in the concepts of Christianity and Enlightenment, the abolitionist movements of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century "employed a large spectrum of approaches to combat slavery ... including boycotts, legislation, logical arguments, and even acts of armed violence" (Jones, "Danger of Sympathy" 243). Challenging the institution and fighting for the freedom of slaves, the abolitionists of the 1830s and 1840s even began producing anti-slavery narratives that appealed to the emotions of white readers while portraying the atrocities of white masters against their black slaves.

Moreover, many oppressed slaves found their own ways of fighting against the unfavourable conditions that were imposed upon them by the unrelenting racist ideology. Although there existed a legal possibility of slave emancipation, i.e. manumission, such a practice was rarely applied in the 1830s, so slaves often employed their own tactics of resistance. As Rodriguez writes, black struggles against slavery emerged in different forms as some slaves broke their masters' tools or, more commonly, tried to escape. Growing tired of being denied their dignity and liberty, they attempted not only to attain their freedom, but also to sabotage the slave-holding economy in which they were forced to participate. Some slaves even resorted to drastic measures and organized rebellions; however, with no lasting success in terms of changing the institution (127). Along those lines, Erkkila mentions the well-known slave insurrection that took place in Virginia in 1831, when Nat Turner led the most blood-shedding rebellion in American history. The rebellion was violently stifled, and many blacks were tortured and killed in the process. Producing widespread paranoia over further rebellions, the Nat Turner revolt even "led to a tightening of slave laws and an increasingly vigorous defense of the institution and culture of slavery throughout the South" (56).

The socio-historical context of Poe's life was, as shown, a period of troublesome political and cultural agendas. During the 1830s and 1840s, when he produced the majority of his fiction, American society was deeply entangled in the racist ideology that not only produced horrific consequences on non-white people, but also politically polarized the nation. Once underway, Lipsitz argues, "genocide and slavery shaped the experiences and attitudes of individuals, grounding racism in micro-social practice as well as macro-social policy" (125). However, as Poe's own attitudes about race and slavery were, to say the least, vague, they have become a matter of an intense scholarly debate. In order to establish a framework for the historical reading of the writer's tales, it is first necessary to mention the difficulty of his political positioning, as well as his placement in the American literary canon.

### 3. A POLITICAL POSITIONING AND HISTORICAL READING OF POE

To this very day, many critics have associated Poe with racism and viewed him as an apologist of slavery. Rowe, for example, declares that “Poe was a proslavery racist and should be regarded as such in whatever approach we take to his life and writings” (qtd. in Whalen, “Average Racism” 7). Similarly, Carboni believes that the writer “took a clear conservative Southern stance, openly defending” slavery (XVI). Along similar lines, Levin argues that Poe’s “letters and articles reveal him as an unyielding upholder of slavery, and ... no great admirer of the Negro” (qtd. in Rudoff 64). Much of such reasoning originates from the controversial Paulding-Drayton review, a profoundly racist text that extols chattel slavery and whose authorship was commonly misattributed to Poe. However, as many scholars have contested, Poe was not the author of that review.<sup>1</sup> Since the only document in which Poe allegedly declared his attitudes on slavery appears to be an unreliable source, the arguments in favor of his racism become nothing short of unconvincing.

On the other hand, it is also possible to reconstruct (or at least to attempt thereof) Poe’s views from another perspective. For example, though raised in a slave-holding family, Poe himself never owned a slave. Moreover, there seems to be some evidence suggesting that Poe even freed one slave by selling him to another Negro. As Erkkila reports, according to a bill of sale from 1829, Poe acted as an agent in the sale of “a negro man named Edwin” to a supposedly black person (40, 71). Kennedy acknowledges the possibility that Poe indentified with the position of slaves as he was disinherited by his foster father with whom he had a problematic relationship. Such identification might have also been derived from his early childhood when he, living with the Allans, played with slave children on plantations, and even interacted with a black “Mammy” who took care of him (*Historical Guide* 20, 31).

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<sup>1</sup> Whalen, for example, provides a linguistic analysis of the review, cogently proving that the text was not written by Poe, but by Nathaniel Beverly Tucker. Tucker was a proslavery journalist who, like Poe, also wrote for the *Southern Literary Messenger* in which the review was published (“Average Racism” 5-11).

The evidence from both sides of the argument appears elusive and highly speculative. As much as it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions, it seems like an impossible task to accurately determine Poe's views on race, especially if regarding only the contested review or some biographical elements of his life. Although much of the critical debate has revolved around slavery, what the "dubious" writer thought about other issues also remains ambiguous as he never clearly expressed his attitudes. This ambiguity is only complicated with the fact that, during his life, he often migrated across the Mason-Dixon Line – born in Boston and raised in Virginia, he spent much of his career as a journalist and editor in the cities of Baltimore, Richmond, New York, and Philadelphia, "playing the national man of letters in the South and, on occasion, the exiled Southerner in the North" (Kennedy and Weisberg xiii).

Furthermore, as Goddu suggests, the problem of Poe's placement – both in terms of his political attitudes and his position within the literary mainstream – needs to be considered in relation to region. For a long time, due to his alleged anti-democracy and pro-slavery viewpoints, Poe used to be academically disputed and excluded from the American literary cannon.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, though lacking national acknowledgement, he was identified as a Southern author and included in the literary canon of the region. However, from the perspective of Southern scholars, Poe wrote almost nothing about the history of the South. With his regional identity thus disputed, it is only owing to the artistic value of his works that he was granted the canonized status. Being dislocated and divorced from the historical context, Poe was often associated only with his art as such (Goddu, *Gothic America* 77-80).

Indeed, Poe used to be read as a romantic writer unconcerned with politics and social issues. In that sense, the mainstream literary critics almost unanimously regarded him as being completely uninfluenced by history, mostly reading his Gothic fiction with regard to psychological issues. As Carboni asserts encapsulating the predominant scholarly opinion,

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<sup>2</sup> F.O. Matthiessen refused to incorporate Poe in his seminal work *American Renaissance* which pays tribute to 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers, reasoning that Poe was "bitterly hostile to democracy" (Goddu, *Gothic America* 77).

“[a]lthough in his articles in the *Messenger* and other journals Poe occasionally deals with political and social events, very little, indeed, almost nothing, of this historical change seems to influence his creative writing directly” (XIII). Being a self-professed aesthete, Poe himself only contributed to such ahistorical considerations of his works.<sup>3</sup>

However, though for almost the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars read Poe as detached from history, recent years have given rise to an alternative critical effort to locate him “back into his cultural milieu and to illustrate that rather than an apolitical romantic Poe was indeed ... very much engaged in the major debates of his day” (Jones, “Danger of Sympathy” 239). One of the critics who are inclined to such a revisionist reading is Betsy Erkkila. Despite Poe’s belief in the purely aesthetic purpose of art, Erkkila proposes that the aesthetic be seen “as a production within rather than outside history” (41). More specifically, what she tries to do while reading his works is to find a connection between the simultaneous emergence of the aesthetic mode of writing and the scientific ideas of racial difference. Therefore, Erkkila analyzes Poe in terms of “social, political, and specifically racial struggles of his time” (41).

Erkkila’s critical standpoint is congruent with the relatively new approach within the cultural studies to rethink race as confluent with literary production (Kennedy and Weissberg xii). As Zwarg asserts, critics now find “Poe’s engagement with painful issues of his day undeniable, particularly as they relate to traumas of slavery and ... imperialism at home and abroad” (7). Within this new analytical framework, many scholars have begun searching for racial signifiers in Poe’s fiction. In that sense, Person argues that, though Poe may not have written about race and slavery *directly*, he nevertheless addressed those issues while subtly masking them behind the symbolism of color and other racially encoded signs that are present in his tales (“Philosophy of Amalgamation” 212).

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<sup>3</sup> Poe’s most famous critical essays – “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The Poetic Principle” – support the views of the critics who hold him to be an ardent believer in literary aestheticism. In the former, he states his preference for short pieces of fiction that could be read in one sitting, and emphasizes the emotional effect of literature on the reader. In the latter, he declares his belief in art for the sake of art.

The shift towards historicizing Poe was in large part inspired by the ideas of Toni Morrison. In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison investigates the literary works by some white American authors, seeking the implicit presence of the element of blackness, i.e. an American-Africanist presence. As she explains, because the issue of race is a politically charged subject, writers have collectively avoided addressing it in their works (4-5). “In matters of race”, she says, “silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (9). However, such evasion has produced a substitute language that relies on codes and signs in order to discuss delicate social issues, with the issue of race often being hidden behind the tropes of blackness that signify the Africanist presence. Therefore, the power of writers manifests itself in “[t]he languages they use and the social and historical context which those languages signify” (15). When it comes to Poe, Morrison disagrees with the traditional reading of his works as having little or nothing to say about black people, and clearly asserts that “[n]o early writer is more important to the concept of African Americanism than Poe” (32). Widely quoted in the works of Poe scholars, this sentence has become not only a common reference but also a certain landmark for the new historicized reading of Poe.

While discussing the reasons behind Poe’s reluctance to openly deal with race and other political issues, another historical aspect of the time needs to be taken into account. As both Carboni and Kennedy report, the 1830s and 1840s in America were also a period of an emerging mass culture. Due to the developments in traffic distribution and printing technology, the literary market was marked by the growing popularity of magazines, newspapers, and other periodicals that published not only news but also literary pieces. When it came to publishing books, without any existing international copyright laws, American publishers preferred the works of British authors as a much cheaper option than the works of their American counterparts. In such an economic context, the rapidly expanding periodical trade became a better opportunity for aspiring American authors to have their works published

(Carboni XII, XIV; Kennedy, *Historical Guide* 23). In the light of those circumstances, the disinherited Poe tried to make ends meet and establish himself as a writer by working for various magazines. Seeing the publishing field as an opportunity to “combine his diverse talents as a critic, a tale writer and a poet”, as well as to reach a wider audience, he even proclaimed himself to be a *magazinish* (Whalen, “Poe and Publishing Industry” 76).

As some magazines required political neutrality, their employees were sometimes discouraged from pronouncing their views on social issues. Prior to becoming the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe was employed under the supervision of the editor Thomas W. White who demanded of his journalists to write culturally neutral texts that would appease both northern and southern readers. Such editorial practices were also applied to Poe who was thus prevented from openly expressing his political attitudes (Whalen, “Average Racism” 16). Therefore, the writer’s alleged lack of interest in the social issues of his time should be regarded as pertaining to the needs of a heterogeneous mass audience. By writing (only seemingly!) neutral tales, he was able to avoid provoking disdain in the readers of both conflicted regions, and earn himself some profit in the process. With those circumstances in mind, Whalen puts forth his concept of “average racism” and accordingly applies it to Poe. As he explains, average racism is not a single set of beliefs, but rather an attempt at achieving a political consensus within the pressures of the literary market (30).

However, though Poe appeared neutral for the purpose of appeasing the politically divided readership, as the more recent critics who historicize him suggest, his works are very much involved with the historical context of his time. That he was engaged with the social issues of the antebellum period is, to such critics, indisputable. Yet even among them, there seems to be no consensus as to what kind of messages Poe tried to convey while implicitly addressing those issues in his fiction. Goddu, for example, while reading some of his sensationalist tales in terms of racial images and slavery, believes that the writer subtly

utilized “conventions deployed by pro- and anti-slavery proponents alike to sell his own tales” (“Poe, sensationalism, and slavery” 92-93). Though focusing on Poe’s profit-related motives in a similar manner to Whalen, Goddu implies that the writer’s tales are, in fact, an irrelevant source of determining his political attitudes. However, there are critics, such as Kennedy, who believe that Poe not only challenged, but also mocked his country’s official politics in relation to its imperialistic practices, slavery, and Indian removal, at times even criticizing the white racism of his society (“Mania for Composition” 2-5). As Kennedy sees it, through the means of his fiction, Poe *did* convey his personal political beliefs.

To accurately pinpoint Poe’s opinions on the major social issues of his time is, as shown, a futile task. As he never publically declared his attitudes on race and slavery, it is virtually impossible to deduce what he really thought of those issues. However, though his biography turns out to be an unstable source for drawing any kind of conclusion, the answers to those questions should be looked for in his fiction. Although the writer declared himself primarily as an aesthete, Whalen has credibly demonstrated why he had to hide his real attitudes. Taking that fact into account, it seems plausible to assume that Poe cleverly used his Gothic fiction in order to conceal his opinions behind metaphors and symbols, leaving the readers with a task of finding and revealing them. Therefore, in this thesis, the chosen stories will be read in such a way. In other words, each of the following eight tales will be examined so as to be shown how Poe not only addressed, but also criticized many problematic principles and practices of the antebellum period. For that reason, the political and cultural implications in his tales will be analyzed with regard to many literary tropes that reveal both the Africanist presence and the presence of Native Americans as the other widely oppressed social group. Within the framework of the new critical current that reads him in a historical context, here too Poe’s Gothic tales will be appropriately historicized.

#### 4. THE ISSUE OF RACE FICTIONALIZED – ANALYSIS OF TALES

While historicizing the Gothic, it is important to note that the term itself is not easy to define. In its narrowest sense, the genre “develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events that are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states” (Abrams 111). However, besides dealing with psychology, the literary significance of the Gothic also lies in its ability to respond to reality, especially at times of intense social upheaval (Punter and Byron xix). As Veeder suggests while examining the subversive potential of popular fiction, the Gothic may be seen as “the interplay of psychological and social forces” often produced during specific historical moments (21).

As shown, most of Poe’s stories were written at the peak of the racial debate and other political tensions in the United States, including the ones that are here analyzed. Since he wrote in different literary modes, some of the analyzed tales are conventionally Gothic, whereas others are humorous, satirical, or close to detective fiction. Nonetheless, each of them, more or less pronouncedly, contains Gothic elements while dealing with the social affairs of the period. Although the writer tackles many different issues, the common thread interwoven through all the eight tales is the issue of race, which is explored in relation to both Indians and blacks, and placed in a broader context of the American imperialistic politics.

In “Some Words with a Mummy”, Poe satirizes the belief in both Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and the national narratives that support it. While doing so, he debunks some common myths regarding race theory and democracy, revealing his skepticism towards America’s political agenda. As it tackles some general issues pertaining to the United States politics and culture, this tale serves as a purposeful introduction into the subsequently analyzed stories which deal with more specific political and cultural implications.

In the following two tales – “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” and “The Man That Was Used Up” – Poe both mirrors and criticizes the oppression of Native Americans. In the former, which is partially set in the American South, he does so by making an analogy between a historical insurrection in India against the British rule and the position of Native Americans in 19<sup>th</sup>-century US. In the latter, he refers to the Indian Wars of 1830s in order to demonstrate the horrifying potential of technology which helped Americans in their violent usurpation of Indian land. He also satirizes the glorified military figures of the Jacksonian period, as well as the tradition of captivity narratives that supported such glorification. Both tales reveal his criticism of American imperialism and the concept of Manifest Destiny.

Whereas those two stories focus on the mistreatment of Indians, in the following tales Poe deals with the consequences of American politics on the other largely oppressed group – African-American slaves. Set in the South, “The Gold-Bug” thus includes a stereotypical portrayal of a Negro servant and his seemingly respectful relationship with his master, through which Poe satirizes the supposedly paternalistic nature of slavery. Moreover, though the Negro is presented as mentally and linguistically inept,<sup>4</sup> his peculiar speech will be interpreted not as inferior but, quite contrarily, as advanced in relation to the speech of his white master. In that sense, through the means of linguistic inversion, Poe here implies the potential for the reversal of master-slave roles that are *not*, as America saw it, naturally given.

The master-slave role reversal is explored more profoundly in “Hop-Frog” and “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether”. Both of these stories, as most critics recognize them, respond to the Southern fear of slave rebellions, and can be read as tales of black racial revenge. While “Hop-Frog” portrays an abused court jester who takes revenge on his violent king, in “The System” it is a revolt of psychiatric patients against their keepers that serves as a metaphor for slave rebellions against their white masters. However, in neither of the tales

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<sup>4</sup> Though primarily focusing on Indians, “The Man That Was Used Up” also entails a brief portrayal of a Negro valet. That tale, “The Gold-Bug”, and “A Predicament” are the only three stories in which Poe explicitly includes African-American characters (Whalen, “Average Racism” 30-31).

does Poe explicitly portray African Americans, but rather employs other characters to figure as metaphorical slaves, while also relying on different tropes of blackness. In the words of Morrison, “[e]ven, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (46-47). Though these stories may be read as Poe’s criticism of abolitionist narratives that encourage slaves to rebel, they will also be interpreted as the writer’s message that the oppressed people justifiably seek their freedom – not because of their racially driven violence, but because of their dire social circumstances.

The following tale, the widely famous “The Black Cat” that heavily relies on Gothic imagery, will be read with regard to racially coded use of colors. In that sense, the relationship between the narrator and his cat will be compared to the one between slaveholders and their slaves; however, not only in terms of what slavery does to blacks but also to the minds of the guilt-ridden white masters. Moreover, by means of analyzing the pet-holding trope, this tale will also be read as Poe’s criticism of proslavery fiction that sentimentalized the master-slave relationship in accordance with the paternalistic argument that justified slavery.

Finally, the analysis of “The Premature Burial”, another typically Gothic tale, will deal with the concept of social death as a metaphor for the position of slaves, which is achieved through the trope of live burial. By making an analogy between the confinement of his narrator in a coffin-like berth of a vessel and the conditions of Africans brought to America in slave ships, Poe once again critically addresses one of the many problematic aspects of the peculiar institution. What is more, as it will be shown, this tale also provides some clues as to how Poe’s fear-provoking sensationalist fiction ought to be read. In other words, the last part of its analysis will prove that the writer indeed used his writings so as to subtly and implicitly criticize many political and cultural issues of the antebellum America.

#### 4.1. “Some Words with a Mummy” (1845)

Although containing a Gothic trope of an apparently dead mummy coming to life, this arguably humorous tale is generally regarded as a political satire that implicitly reveals some of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century myths which supported the widespread belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority. Such myths were, according to Kennedy, often reinforced through fictional works which glorified the unique and supreme American society in order to establish and maintain a strong national identity. Those nationalist narratives usually lauded the struggles of white Americans to claim new land and attain freedom, while intentionally omitting accompanying atrocities inflicted upon both Native Americans and blacks (“Mania for Composition” 4).

However, Kennedy qualifies Poe as an opponent to such trends as he contends that “[i]n the face of cultural pressure to construct a national narrative, Poe mocked fetishizing of American subjects, and his complicated resistance to literary nation-building left telltale evidence in his fiction” (6). Moreover, as he continues, since refusing to identify himself as a writer with nationalist aspirations, Poe not only transcended, but also criticized any kind of jingoism in literature, openly discarding such artistic pretensions in one of his essays: “The watchword was now a ‘national literature!’—as if any true literature could be ‘national’—as if the world at large were not the only proper stage for the literary *histrion*” (qtd. in Kennedy 7).

This is not to say that Poe’s works do not contain political implications, but rather that they are unburdened by the widely adopted nationalist ideology. When Poe addressed that ideology, he did so by satirically provoking the notion of white supremacy, which was the dominant force behind the American social structure. “Some Words with a Mummy” is a perfect example of such implied criticism, so Kennedy delineates the tale as an “exercise in antinationalist fabulation” in which “a scientific experiment backfires on Anglo-American savants eager to confirm their own racial and cultural superiority” (20).

The scientific experiment he mentions is conducted by a group of renowned men of the antebellum era who, joined by an unnamed narrator, unravel an Egyptian mummy and treat it with a galvanic battery, eventually causing it – much to their utter amazement – to resurrect. The several-centuries-old mummy introduces itself as Count Allamistakeo and engages the men in a lengthy dispute over the matters concerning (pseudo)science and politics, debunking the myths of Anglo-Saxon supremacy with reference to, as Kennedy detects, “historiography, race theory, technology, and political philosophy” (21).

The belief in Anglo-Saxon supremacy was strengthened against the backdrop of several aspects of American society – Jacksonian democracy, the 1844 presidential elections, the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the annexation of Texas and the impending war with Mexico – the common denominator being territorial expansionism. Kennedy reports that such expansionist tendencies lie at the core of the racist belief that white Americans were ordained by God to conquer the wilderness – “[b]y the 1840s, the phrases ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon civilization’ had become touchstones of American nationalist rhetoric, evoked in political addresses”, with the idea of *progress* also carrying racial connotations (21). As shown before, such a racial ideology provided official justification for slavery, Indian removal and the invasion of Mexico.

At the same time, George Gliddon,<sup>5</sup> a famous American Egyptologist whom Poe fictionalized as one of the characters in the tale, used Egyptology as a key to understanding racial origins. As a proponent of polygenesis – a theory that hypothesizes multiple racial origins – he relied on the craniological measurements of ancient Egyptians in order to “demonstrate that differences in internal crania capacity between ancient Caucasian and ancient Negroid skulls correlated significantly with contemporary differences” (Nelson 532). More specifically, as Nelson notes, the skulls were measured so as to be proven that

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<sup>5</sup> Gliddon “was pivotal both in cultivating public, museum interest in the ‘wonders’ of ancient Egypt and in promulgating its research value for racial science” (Nelson 530).

civilization arose from white, rather than black Egyptians – the latter were servants and slaves in Egypt, just as they were in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Therefore, it is evident how the supporters of polygenesis found their explanation for the superiority of the white race within the framework of Egyptology, which served as “a way to experience the U.S social body as historically, nationally, and racially exceptional” (Nelson 531).

Conversely, as Kennedy reports, the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race was also explained within the completely opposite theory of monogenesis – a belief that all races had a unitary origin traced back to the biblical Adam. According to that belief, racial differences were accounted for by evolutionary and environmental causes and, unsurprisingly, the Caucasian race was distinguished as the most developed one (22).

Either way, the antebellum discussions about racial origins revolved around the two competing theories, both of them being able to serve the dominant racial ideology of the superior whites and the inferior others. In that sense, Nelson sees this tale as Poe’s commentary on “the scientific production of otherness” (515), but in which the issue of race becomes rather complicated. This point is best illustrated in the story as Dr. Ponnonner questions the mummy about the concepts of human origin in ancient Egypt, to which Allamistakeo replies about there being only one individual who speculated on

the origin of *the human race*; and by this individual the very word *Adam* ... was employed. He employed it, however, in a generical sense, with reference to the spontaneous germination from rank soil (just as a thousand of the lower genera of creatures are germinated)—the spontaneous germination, I say, of five vast hordes of men, simultaneously upspringing in five distinct and nearly equal divisions of the globe. (Poe 388)

Laden with racial connotations, this passage demonstrates Poe’s remarkable ability to hide multiple layers of meaning within a relatively short statement. Firstly, by suggesting a

spontaneous polygenetic creation, it reveals Allamistakeo's refutation of the group's monogenetic view. Such a view is supported by their reactions to the mummy's words as Mr. Buckingham retorts that "we are to attribute the marked inferiority of the old Egyptians in all particulars of science, when compared with the moderns, and more especially with the Yankees, altogether to the superior solidity of the Egyptian skull" (Poe 388-89). Evidently, by referring to pseudoscientific craniometrical measurements, Buckingham compares "Yankees" – i.e. Anglo-Americans – to the old Egyptians, and deems them evolutionary superior and more developed. The process of producing "otherness" is thus quite apparent and, to quote Kennedy, the mummy "unmistakably represents the dark, racial Other presumed by Anglo-Saxon craniologists to be intellectually and culturally inferior" (24).

By contrast, while Allamistakeo's words overthrow the monogenetic argument, at the same time they reinforce the polygenetic one. Given that Poe employed Dr. Gliddon as a character in the story, it seems reasonable to ask how his real-life polygenetic standpoint, also serving the racially biased ideology, gets refuted. The answer lies in the mummy's words referring to all those "hordes of men" being created simultaneously and "in equal divisions", which, according to Kennedy, contains a non-hierarchical explanation of racial origins (23). This supports Nelson's claim that the question of polygenesis – as the basis for white superiority – remains "unresolved, if not actually refuted" (516). Notwithstanding the lack of a clear-cut conclusion, Poe deftly addresses the issue of race by challenging Anglo-Saxon superiority, whether it be justified by the polygenetic or the monogenetic "scientific" strain.

Furthermore, this tale tackles many other topics relevant to the time, one of them being contemporary politics. At one point, the conversation moves on to the concept of democracy, which the men laud by stressing the advantages they "enjoyed in living where there was suffrage *ad libitum*, and no king" (Poe 391). However, the mummy remains unimpressed and recalls a similar political experiment wherein thirteen Egyptian provinces declared freedom,

established constitutions, and “set a magnificent example on the rest of the mankind”, but only to soon turn “into the most odious and insupportable despotism”, that is, “the rule of *Mob*” (Poe 391). The comparison to the United States is nothing short of straightforward as it rather openly reveals Poe’s critical stance on the Jacksonian democracy. By placing this into a more specific nationalist context of the 1844 elections and J.K. Polk’s public exploitation of the concepts of territorial expansion and Manifest Destiny, Kennedy suggests that Poe here equates democracy with tyranny and deconstructs the concept of American exceptionalism (24-25). Moreover, as Hoffman asserts, “Poe looks upon the Great American Experience from a perspective that makes it seem vulgar, trivial, self-defeating” (196).

The latter claim is applicable to other aspects of American society that Allamistakeo vigorously discredits. In the matters of technology, for example, the mummy seems to have an answer to all the presented evidence of the alleged US superiority, proving point by point how Egypt had a more developed architecture, traffic, glass manufacture, and so on. The only thing that makes Americans better is simply having – cough drops. This mockingly indicative fact only seems to strengthen Poe’s presumed authorial intent to criticize his own society.

All in all, during the course of the debate, the mummy admonishes the men – who metonymically represent the entire American population – for their ignorance, lack of culture, and false beliefs, reminding them how inferior they actually are. In the words of Nelson, “the mummy tears down the modern men’s sense of cultural, political, scientific, and racial progress, suggesting that – far from advancing – the civilization and civic order they represent has degenerated from earlier ages” (515). In this thought-provoking satirical allegory, Poe ridicules the idea of American progress quite credibly, setting up a cultural diagnosis of the 1840s, and proving he was by no means loyal to his country’s official politics.

#### 4.2. “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” (1844)

Poe’s political skepticism is also discernible in “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” – as was the case with Egypt in the previous tale, here too he utilizes historical analogies in order to critically confront America’s political principles, especially its imperialistic practices. He does so, namely, by partially placing the setting in an Indian city, amidst a real-life uprising, so as to draw a comparison between Indians and Native Americans, both of the peoples having a similar experience of being oppressed by their respective governments – the British and the United States. Let us, then, see how the story unfolds while dealing with this issue.

Mr. Bedloe, a highly sensitive man prone to fits of neuralgia and treated by Dr. Templeton by mesmeric techniques, wanders into the Ragged Mountains near Charlottesville, Virginia, while high on morphine. As he later recalls, his journey occurred one day “during the strange *interregnum* of the seasons which in America is termed the Indian Summer” (Poe 319). Indicatively, the word “Indian” seems to foreshadow the events that are to follow. By providing such a temporal frame, as Kennedy observes, “Poe intimates a deliberate association between the Native Americans mistakenly called Indians and the people of the Asian subcontinent who resisted British rule” (“Mania for Composition” 19). Already at the beginning, Poe prefigures the analogy that will later on be more explicitly presented.

The scenery of the mountains denotes a typically Gothic atmosphere – everything is covered in a “thick and peculiar mist” (Poe 320), and portrayed as nightmarish and fearsome. At one point, Bedloe describes the dreary desolation of the mountains “trodden never before by the foot of a human being”, and whose “solitude seemed absolutely virgin” (Poe 319). Seemingly, Poe evokes the myth of the Virgin Land that figured prominently within the 19<sup>th</sup>-century concept of Manifest Destiny. In that sense, the untouched wilderness was seen as an empty space to be filled with human presence, fittingly serving the US west-conquering aspirations as white Americans ascribed themselves the prerogative to colonize the continent.

Furthermore, as Bedloe grows increasingly dreadful and agitated by the site, he remembers “strange stories told about these Ragged Hills, and of the uncouth and fierce races of men who tenanted their groves and caverns”<sup>6</sup> (Poe 319). To which strange stories Poe alludes becomes clearer if taking into account Rowe’s comparison between Poe’s tale and the historical account of Lewis and Clark. In their reports, the latter “stress the warlike qualities of the Native American tribes they encounter for the sake of justifying U.S. removal” (88), also noting that the natives vanished not because of the colonizers’ genocidal acts, but because the savage tribes fought amongst each other (91). Since the Lewis and Clark expedition was officially commissioned, the government’s role in creating public opinion on native peoples becomes evident. Therefore, it might be that, by referring to the “strange stories” about “uncouth and fierce races”, Poe ironically probes such narratives.

However, it seems illogical to mention the races that had lived there while also referring to the virgin land that Bedloe discovered as “the first adventurer” (Poe 320). In Kennedy’s view, Poe warns of the natives’ treatment as he implies a “racialized construction of history” through a contradiction of entering a virgin land, but which was first occupied by those savages (19-20). As he suggests, Bedloe implicitly “articulates a notion of Euro-American superiority ... in claiming to be the first white man to ‘penetrate’ the virgin land” (20). Since the indigenous people were seen as “the other”, once again there is a reference to the settlers’ self-appointed right to forcefully claim their land.

Continuing the journey, Bedloe goes through an odd and uncanny experience – he finds himself in an oriental city, participates in a blood-shedding battle, hides in a kiosk with overpowered soldiers, sees a man escaping from a palace, and eventually gets killed by an arrow. After having an out-of-body experience but returning to the mountains alive, he retells his bizarre anecdote to Templeton. The doctor tells him that he minutely described

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<sup>6</sup> Kennedy maintains that Poe here refers to the Indian tribes in Virginia which had perished by the 1840s while resisting the white settlers’ violence (*The Portable Poe* 615).

the Indian city of Benares, upon the Holy River. The riots, the combats, the massacre, were the actual events of the insurrection of Cheyte Sing, which took place in 1780, when Hastings was put in imminent peril of his life. The man escaping by the string of turbans, was Cheyte Sing himself. The party in the kiosk were sepoy and British officers, headed by Hastings. (Poe 325)

The portrayed event is not entirely fictional inasmuch as it refers “to what by 1840 had become the primal scene of eighteenth-century British imperialism, the 1781 insurrection of the supporters of the raja Chait Singh, crushed by Warren Hastings in Benares” (Zwarg 13). Apparently, Poe provides a historically accurate reference to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Indian uprising against the British rule administered by Warren Hastings.<sup>7</sup> The question that here arises is – what was the writer’s motivation behind employing this real-life event in Indian history? Both Rowe’s and Kennedy’s readings give interesting answers.

Rowe propounds the view that “Poe’s rhetorical uses of non-European peoples should be interpreted in relation to late eighteen- and nineteenth-century imperialism and the discursive practices employed by the imperial powers to rationalize their subjugation and ... deconstruction of native peoples” (75). As he elaborates, Poe’s literary allusion to American imperialism reproduces the power relations that were present in the British colonial rule over India. In other words, Poe shifts “the racial hierarchies from the ‘peoples of color’ in British India ... to African and Native Americans”, while designating Great Britain as a model “for imperial power in North America and India” (77). Because of such a peculiar narrative doubling, Rowe interprets this tale as Poe’s imperial fantasy, connecting it to, as this tale’s Gothic imagery shows, “dream-like, physis [sic] topographies” (90).

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<sup>7</sup>Hastings was a British governor in India, who demanded of Bengali rajas to provide him with military and financial contributions. When raja Chait Singh, the ruler of Benares, failed to do so in an attempt to resist the British rule, Hastings arrived in the city to arrest him, only to have his soldiers slaughtered by the Raja’s supporters in a violent uprising. The Raja escaped, and Hastings was later impeached for his oppressive misconduct in India, including this incident. However, he was acquitted (Rowe 91-92; Zwarg 13).

Besides the eerie setting of the mountains, what Bedloe witnessed when transported to Benares also qualifies as such a topos. To exemplify, he describes “an Eastern-looking city, such as we read of in the Arabian Tales”, its teeming streets, picturesque architecture, lively Bazaars, wild animals and, generally, an atmosphere of tumultuous chaos (Poe 321). In such a mystical dreamscape, Bedloe experiences “a spiritual and temporal passage from Virginia to the mysterious Orient” (Rowe 91). By means of his transmigration, Poe provides two settings – an American (Southern) and an Indian one. This topographic duality may, thereby, be considered as one of the devices by which the mentioned narrative doubling is achieved.

There is yet another example that demonstrates this doubling, and it regards Bedloe’s death. As Templeton explains, Bedloe “died” in Benares in exactly the same manner as Mr. Oldeb, a British officer who was killed with a black, poisonous arrow while participating in the actual insurrection. Later on, the narrator learns from a newspaper that Bedloe accidentally died by a black, poisonous leech applied to his temple by Dr. Templeton. Moreover, his name in the article was misspelled as Bedlo, which is Oldeb conversed. Rhetorically linked in their names and deaths, the two white men thus become political counterparts – one representing the British rule over India, and the other the US oppression of Native Americans. Both men’s deaths, according to Kennedy, signal the warning that “like British imperialism in India, American efforts to subjugate dark-skinned, indigenous population may have fatal consequences” (19). Therefore, as he concludes, “Bedloe’s body becomes the site of symbolic retribution for the violent appropriation of tribal lands and the subsequent shame of Indian removal” (20).

These narrative doublings support the reading of this tale as a historical analogy between what the British did to Indians and how Americans treated their natives. The similarity in racial hierarchies recognizable in both British and American imperialism is thus evident. Both races – Indians and the natives – endured subjugation and suffered cruelties

committed by the Anglo-Saxons convinced in their superiority (Kennedy 19; Rowe 75). Much of American imperialism, in Rowe's view, may be understood with respect to the British model. As he claims, although the US tried to achieve political independence from Great Britain, it still imitated its culture, and "westward expansion was often rationalized as a continuation of the migratory and conquering nature of the 'Anglo-Saxon'" (76).

Poe managed to literarily reproduce those imitations of colonial practices, assumingly communicating the point that violent acts cause destruction and death, no matter the place. That he imbued the tale with Gothic elements – nightmare, death, scary surroundings, even *doppelgänger* motif – is no wonder. Having a strong interest in both science and the supernatural, he also tackled the issues of transmigration, mesmerism and incarnation. However, whether to account for Bedloe's dreamy, drug-induced experience as a phantasm or a real case of spiritual relocation is irrelevant for the political undertone of this tale. Therefore, its message, conveyed within the Indian setting where the writer resituated the domestic battle, bears a "considerable significance for the US" (Rowe 92).

All things considered, this historical significance seems unequivocal, so Kennedy characterizes "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" as a cautionary tale of the dangers of imperialism, with its warning focusing chiefly on the "contemporary treatment of Native Americans" (19). However, this is not the only tale in which Poe deals with this controversial issue in American history. How he criticized the military practices pertaining to the removal of Native Americans will be analyzed in the following story.

#### 4.3. "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839)

Widely qualified as a military parody, this story unfolds "along the axis of gender, technology, and nationalism" (Blake 328). Many critics – such as Blake, Kennedy and Person – read it as Poe's response to the Indian wars of the 1830s. In particular, Blake recognizes it

as an “outrageous parody of the ideological assumptions” underlying the US army’s malevolent actions against the natives during the Seminole and Black Hawk Wars (327). As Kennedy points out, the story responds to Indian removal in that it reduces its character – the national hero Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith – to “a mere assemblage of artificial parts” (“Mania for Composition” 8). As his body is assembled out of prosthetic devices, both general’s identity and his public status depend on technology – the same technology that Americans used to exercise their military power over the “uncivilized” Indians. Therefore, his artificial identity performs the “function of promoting cultural dominance”, which Poe uses to satirize “the master-narrative of Jacksonian empire” (Blake 346). Accordingly, as Poe satirizes the general’s persona, Person interprets the tale as a “critique of male military identity” (“Poe and Gender Constructions” 156). However, at the very beginning, General Smith is depicted as being not only highly regarded, but also uncritically worshipped by the public.

With a passionate interest, the unnamed narrator explains why the general obsessively caught his attention. As he recounts, Smith’s hair was rich and “jetty black”, his teeth were “the most brilliantly white”, his eyes were perfect, and his voice issued “clearness, melody, and strength” (Poe 349-50). Moreover, he had “admirably modelled” arms, superb shoulders and perfectly proportioned legs (Poe 350). The infatuated narrator compares his outstanding physique to Brutus and Apollo, while also admiring his manner. His admiration is echoed in the opinions of his friends and acquaintances, as some of them deem Smith as “one of the most remarkable men of our age”, as having “a high reputation for courage”, and as being “a downright fire-eater” or “a prodigy of valour” (Poe 351). Lauded with superlatives, the general, who participated in “the late tremendous swamp-fight away down South, with the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indians” (Poe 351), is regarded with nothing short of awe. In the eyes of the public, he is the ultimate hero of the wars against the Indians.

During the Jacksonian era, military figures were publicly glorified, and this story reflects that fact. American generals, like the fictional Smith, thus gained considerable relevance. As Blake reports, many scholars suggest that Smith was, in fact, modeled after Winfield Scott, a famous general who fought Indians on many occasions, and a Whig presidential candidate (326). The historical context of the tale's production was, as Kennedy notes, during the second Seminole War, while Scott was forcing Cherokees to Oklahoma<sup>8</sup> ("Mania for Composition" 8). The tale is often published with the subtitle "A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign" which, in Blake's view, provides a military context and parodies martial achievements in Jacksonian America (323). While the Kickapoos were a real tribe banished during the war, Poe personified the term "bugaboo", presumably as an imaginary equivalent of the Indian tribes that the American public dreaded. This dread is reflected in the story as the narrator's interlocutors, whom he questions about the general so as to satisfy his curiosity, collectively deprecate the Indians as savages, "a bloody set of wretches" or "dreadful creatures" (Poe 345-55). Moreover, they refer to the Bugaboo and Kickapoo campaign as "a horrid affair" and "a dreadful business" (Poe 355).

As shown, the general is immensely praised, whereas the very thought of Indians provokes horror and disgust. In that sense, Poe plausibly conveys the public atmosphere surrounding the 1830s wars. According to Blake, the story thus shows "how Andrew Jackson's Indian policy resulted in an increasingly visible professional army, an institution that used military conflict to manufacture democratic heroes and politicians" (329). However, Poe's parody of such figures lies in an ironic twist provided at the end of the story.

During the course of his inquiries, the narrator is unable to resolve the mystery that bothers him – the general seems too good to be true, the circumstances regarding the war remain undisclosed, and his friends fail to provide him with ample information about either.

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<sup>8</sup> "In what was perhaps the most dramatic instance of devastation, the United States government forced eighteen thousand captives of the Cherokee Nation to relocate to Oklahoma in 1838, marching them along what eventually became known as the Trail of Tears" (Blake 331).

Upon answering his questions, all of them only refer to the fact of living in a wonderfully inventive age. The general himself, with whom the narrator conversed at the beginning of the story, only reiterates that belief. “We are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age”, he says while enumerating the supreme inventions of the era, such as rail-roads, spring-guns and other “most wonderful mechanical contrivances” (Poe 352). Kennedy sees this instance as a critical commentary on “national self-adulation that helped to justify Indian removal” (*The Portable Poe* 616), as well as a satirical note on the ideology of American exceptionalism. How this aspect of technology contributes to such criticism is revealed in the story’s flippant finale as the narrator, seeking the general in person, discovers him to have turned into “a large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something” lying on the floor of his home (Poe 356).

As it becomes clear, having been wounded and dismembered by the Indians, the general needs to be mechanically reconstructed so as to regain his publicly-known appearance. Such an action is performed by his Negro valet Pompey, who literally assembles the general with artificial body-parts. In stark contrast to his previous descriptions, the general now has “a funny and squeaky voice” (Poe 356) and is, generally, a terrifying yet pitiable sight to behold. His physical superiority is now revealed as fake and, as the valet hands him the body-parts, he cites the manufacturers’ brands of each part. At this point, the technological products of the “wonderfully inventive age” everyone mentioned are, satirically so, put into practice. As Smith’s military identity is completely deconstructed, the narrator concludes: “It was evident. It was a clear case. Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith was the man—was *the man that was used up*” (Poe 358). Metaphorically, as Kennedy points out, the general has been “used up, dismembered, by his own racial hatred” (“Mania for Composition” 8).

This hatred is readily discernible when he recalls the “bloody action” in which the Indians “not only knocked in the roof of [his] mouth”, but “cut of at least seven eighths of [his] tongue”, because of which he exclaims “D—n the vagabonds!” (Poe 357). Hence, his

wounded body signifies, as Blake states, both “the enemy’s reputed savagery” and “the rapid scientific growth” of American culture (328). The fact that the general is assembled out of prosthetic parts signals the scientific growth in question. As he becomes a hero of military technology, his artificial identity becomes an instrument of power, serving the military to promote “its own institutional relevance” (Blake 344). Therefore, the general metonymically represents the American military might that heavily relied on technology in demonstrating white dominance over the technologically inept and racially inferior Indians. Along similar lines, Person argues that, in this story, “Poe conflates military power and racist ideology”, constructing his general “out of artificial materials manufactured by the capitalist and industrial revolutions that white racism made possible” (157). By turning the idolized general into a ridiculous amorphous bundle, Poe thus shatters the ideal of military manhood, strips it of its ideological value, and reduces war heroes to nothing but empty forms of the self.

Furthermore, apart from functioning as a parody of military identity, Blake regards this tale as a sharp commentary on American captivity narratives which promoted white military figures and encouraged hostilities against Indians (324-29). In the context of the 1830s wars, as he reports, such narratives blossomed. Their agenda was twofold – on the one hand, they were ethnographic accounts of Indian culture; but, on the other, they advocated military campaigns and emphasized the historical necessity of Indian removal, mainly through depicting how brutal Indians tortured and then released American soldiers (331-32). The main focus was on the captive’s suffering, which thus became “the mechanism producing ideological value” (328). Since, in the story, Smith’s injuries point to such an experience, many critics read this story as a captivity narrative. However, Blake discards such a reading and goes on to prove that Poe’s intention was quite the opposite – to mock captivity fiction.

As he argues, Poe eschews the genre’s conventions by omitting Smith’s experience of suffering, and directs our attention “to the aftermath of captivity, to the celebrity granted to

survivors of persecution in war” (324). Since his God-like status and the publicity regarding his condition – which the characters are aware of but unwilling to disclose – overshadow his suffering in captivity, Smith becomes “a soldier whose absurdity effectively questions the genre’s popularity” (328). Therefore, to designate this tale as a captivity narrative would be to ignore its “insidious capacity to transform a distinctly martial experience into a broad endorsement of hegemonic power” (Blake 328). On a related note, Kennedy sees the tale as a negation of the nationalist narratives that instructed Americans “to glorify heroes of dubious achievement and to demonize victims of national violence” (“Mania for Composition” 8-9).

Poe departs from the standards of the genre in yet another aspects – he ignores the category of female gender although the narratives of captured women were by far more popular. As Castiglia writes, contrary to the common gender stereotypes, in those narratives they were presented as strong, persistent, and prosperous. As they had to be resourceful in order to survive, American women realized their potentials within Indian culture, thus gaining freedom they were denied in the patriarchal society. By acknowledging that, in fact, their subdued position within such a society was similar to that of Indians, they sometimes formed bonds with their captors and adapted to their culture. That way, women engaged in cross-cultural negotiation and contradicted the supposedly natural binaries of civilized and savage, male and female. Therefore, those narratives questioned the fixed nature of racial and gender categories, proving that, under new circumstances, new identities may be formed (1-8). In a similar fashion, Blake maintains that “women authors in particular were inclined to present their heroine’s imprisonment as ‘constitutive’ rather than ‘oppressive’ experience, one that stretched the boundaries of gender and identity that dominated white male society” (340).

Yet, in this tale, Poe focuses on a male character, at first crediting him with all the superior qualities that he inherently possesses by virtue of his race and gender – just as the ideology of both normative whiteness and manhood presupposes. Being an epitome of

military manhood, General Smith is also presented as a relentlessly xenophobic male. As Blake asserts, “[i]f selfhood for the female captive produced political awareness and sympathy, then it also grants to the General an eerily fixed identity: he returns from captivity only to become a mechanism” (342). However, as Smith is deconstructed and reassembled, Poe’s rebellion against such notions of fixed identities becomes evident. Presenting him, in the end, not as a norm, but rather as a deviation from the socially entrenched ideal of manhood, the writer deliberately “masculinizes” the genre as yet another indication of his satirical intent to challenge the foundations of the American military power. Such military power, as shown, was largely invested in debasing and demonizing the racial “other”.

The Indians in this story are, as presented, demonized by the public. Due to their alleged racial brutality, the general needs to be constantly assembled. That the task is entrusted to his Negro valet only complicates “the illusion of cultural and racial dominance” of a military figure (Kennedy, “Mania for Composition” 8). Even though blacks were nullified as the subjects of law, the fact that Smith’s restoration depends on one such person signals a political irony – without the black’s aid, “Smith is legally not a person” (Blake 341). Poe here adds a subtle nuance of meaning to the general’s decomposition of identity – the latter is also achieved by means of employing a character of yet another race that white Americans harassed. As both races – the natives and the blacks – reconstruct the general’s body, his artificial identity exposes all “the racial underpinnings of Jacksonian democracy: wars against Indians were necessary to produce the myth of white male heroism, and the enslavement of blacks was likewise necessary to maintain” that myth (Blake 342).

Not only the Indians, but also the Negro valet Pompey is the target of white hatred. While ordering him around, the general insultingly addresses him as “dog”, “scump” or “nigger”, at one point even shouting “Pompey, you black rascal” (Poe 357). Obediently, Pompey does as he is told, and even apologizes for being slow. This may be seen as Poe’s

literary attempt to mirror the cruelty with which whites treated their subordinates – here, a black person is presented as verbally abused. Given the historical circumstances, this may have been the fate of many servants and slaves in the antebellum period. Poe subtly addresses this issue by using a few derogatory terms aimed at his subserviently portrayed servant. Apart from this one, there is another tale that entails a portrayal of a Negro servant – “The Gold-Bug”. Whereas this story primarily focuses on showing the disastrous consequences of American politics concerning Indians, the analysis of “The Gold-Bug” will deal with how it affects another racial group – the blacks. In that light, the literary presentation of African Americans as stereotypical characters is to follow in the analysis of the next tale.

#### 4.4. “The Gold-Bug” (1843)

Akin to Auguste Dupin in Poe’s well-known “tales of ratiocination”, this story’s main character William Legrand employs logic and reason to solve conundrums. By deciphering a cryptogram, and with the help of his Negro servant Jupiter and the narrator, Legrand manages to locate buried treasure and restore his previously lost wealth. Thereby, though conditionally, “The Gold-Bug” may be classified as detective fiction. However, the focal point of this tale’s analysis will also be the issue of race, as presented through the character of the black servant.

The sharp-witted yet moody Legrand lives as a recluse on Sullivan’s Island, near Charleston, South Carolina. Poe describes the island in detail – on its small western part is Fort Moultrie,<sup>9</sup> whereas the eastern part, where Legrand resides, is covered in wild vegetation (280). This historically important island is certainly worth mentioning.<sup>10</sup> As Weissberg reports, Sullivan Island was a significant slave-trade port – by the end of the colonial period, almost half of African slaves were forcefully brought to America through the Charleston area, by

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<sup>9</sup> The military fort was built in 1776 to prevent the British invasion by sea; however, it has been repurposed and today it serves as a museum that offers guided tours and gift shops related to American warfare (Weissberg 129).

<sup>10</sup> As he was stationed there while serving in the US army, this island probably bore personal importance for Poe as well. Moreover, three streets on the island are named in his honor – Poe Avenue, Raven Drive and Goldbug Avenue (Weissberg 130).

ships that first reached the island. From there, they were taken to the Charleston slave market and then to plantations, mostly in South Carolina (133-34). That Poe set his story on this island is unlikely a coincidence, especially if considering the fact that Legrand's distinguished Huguenot lineage refers to historical 19<sup>th</sup>-century slaveholding families of that area (Weissberg 136). Therefore, Sullivan's Island serves as an appropriate spatial background for portraying the Negro experience of servitude.

Legrand lives with Jupiter, a former slave of his family who is, needless to say, a Negro. His very name is already telling – that he is named after the chief deity of Roman mythology is rather incongruous with his position of a servant. This burlesque element, as Weissberg observes, signifies Poe's allusion to the patronizing habit of giving slaves grandiose names (136). What is more, not only was Jupiter a god in white Western thought, he was also the god of light. Therefore, giving his name to a Negro only seems to enhance the burlesque. By thus juxtaposing, tentatively speaking, the connotation of whiteness and light in the servant's name to the fact of his blackness, Poe creatively utilizes the symbolism of color in order to denote the racially established order of the slaveholding South where the story is, fittingly so, set. Such juxtaposition is more overtly presented as the narrator describes the servant's bodily reaction upon witnessing the unearthed treasure: "Jupiter's countenance wore, for some minutes, as deadly a pallor as it is possible, in the nature of things, for any negro's visage to assume" (Poe 288). Negroes may not physically assume the skin color of white people, but they also, at the time, could not assume the whites' social position.

The difference in their position is also shown through the opposition of Legrand and Jupiter as, respectively, white and black characters. Whereas Legrand is clever and eloquent, Jupiter is portrayed as foolish and inarticulate. To illustrate, when describing the found beetle, he says: "De bug is a goole bug, solid, ebery bit of him, inside and all, sep him wing—neber feel half so hebby a bug in my life" (Poe 273). Not only does this utterance show his almost

unintelligible dialect,<sup>11</sup> but it also displays his naiveté as he believes the bug to be of real gold. Moreover, Jupiter is as ignorant as not being able to tell right from left: “Oh, my golly, Massa Will! aint dis here my lef eye for sartain?” (Poe 286), he says while pointing to his right eye.

Owing to his poor speech and intellect, Jupiter is often seen as a humorous figure. Much like in minstrel shows, as Weissberg discusses, he is primarily here to amuse everyone – his white master, the white narrator, and the assumingly white reader of the period. At that time, blacks were broadly presented in American fiction, yet they were never assigned with speaking roles – their appearance in the works of art was marked by silence, and their speech only reported by others. In “The Gold-Bug”, Poe gives his black character a voice, which may appear subversive. However, Weissberg believes that the function of this voice is not to guide the plot, but rather to provide comic relief. Hence, she concludes that Jupiter’s blackness comically affects his speech, thus eliminating him as a potential threat (139-41).

Taking into account that blacks were considered “mentally, morally and linguistically inferior” (Zitter 58), the depiction of Jupiter seems to reflect the 19<sup>th</sup>-century racial notions. Though he *is* given a voice, his speech is still conveyed stereotypically. As Poe himself put it, “[t]he negro is a perfect picture. He is drawn accurately—no feature overshadowed, or distorted” (qtd. in Whalen, “Average Racism” 31). This quote supports Kennedy’s opinion that the story unmasks Poe’s compliance with the “widespread white attitudes about the racial inferiority of blacks” (“Trust No Man” 236). However, there is a fact that complicates this belief – prior to becoming a servant, Jupiter was emancipated from the status of a slave.

Persuaded by Legrand’s concerned family, Jupiter remained with his master even after the manumission. Moreover, the former slave could not be induced, “neither by threats nor by promises, to abandon what he considered his right of attendance upon the footsteps of his young ‘Mass Will’” (Poe 272). What to make of this fact? First of all, this might mean that, in

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<sup>11</sup> There is no critical consensus on Jupiter’s dialect. Whereas Whalen identifies it as Gullah, “a Creole spoken by blacks on the islands of South Carolina” (31), Weissberg deems it geographically and culturally neutral (140).

spite of Legrand's occasional outbursts of anger, his treatment of Jupiter was generally fair, so the latter did not feel the need to leave. Secondly, it could also mean that some servants grew so accustomed to their roles that they did not want to change the only life they were familiar with. After all, the odds of them acquiring a satisfactory social status as free men were pretty low, if not completely nonexistent. However, Whalen proposes that Jupiter's loyalty be read within the concept of average racism, which he, as already shown, cogently attributes to Poe.

Since, according to Whalen, Poe avoided taking a clear stance on controversial issues so as to appease the politically heterogeneous readership, in this story the writer "shrewdly tries to have it both ways" ("Average Racism" 31). On the one hand, he presents the loyalty of black servants to white masters; but on the other, he shuns any public indignation that such a portrayal might elicit. As Whalen further specifies, "[t]hrough a crucial yet subtle change in Jupiter's legal status, Poe attempted to create a sanitized South that could circulate freely in the national literary market", thus capitalizing "on the average racism of his audience" (32). Both Jupiter's freedom and his ultimate devotion to Legrand helped Poe to achieve such an intention. Similarly, Kennedy regards Jupiter's freedom as Poe's means of evading criticism from "Northern readers that he meant to idealize slavery" (*The Portable Poe* 615).

However, not all critics read this tale as an exercise in political neutrality aimed at gaining profit. Contrary to the almost unanimous critical opinion that Jupiter fits common racial stereotypes for the purpose of comic relief, Zitter is convinced that Poe subversively manipulated his character's language in order to show that black slaves surpassed their white owners in terms of "linguistic prowess" (58). As she elaborates, whereas Legrand analytically solves a cryptogram and discovers an unambiguous message, Jupiter's speech is in itself a collection of codes full of multiple meanings to be unraveled. For example, upon mishearing Legrand's mention of the word 'antennae', he says: "Dey aint no tin in him, Massa Will, I keep a tellin on you" (Poe 237), and proceeds to explain that the bug is made out of gold. This

comment about 'tin', as Zitter sees it, does not necessarily exhibit Jupiter's confusion, but rather his prediction that the bug – as it prompts the chain of events that will lead to the discovery of treasure – is indeed, symbolically so, made out of gold. Therefore, Jupiter's language, instead of confirming his idiocy, "evidences his ability to use the rhetorical technique that most depends on an indeterminate meaning of a word, the pun" (61). By virtue of such a polysemous language, the black servant usurps his white master's authority over language, thus achieving a symbolical reversal of power roles (Zitter 64). Being a pun-enthusiast himself, Poe used his favorite literary device in order to camouflage the irony – while Legrand occasionally reprimands Jupiter for being inept, the joke is on him as he is the one who is, in Zitter's opinion, presented as linguistically inferior.

The relationship between Legrand and Jupiter is also a point worth discussing. Whereas in the previous story the Negro servant Pompey is addressed exclusively in pejorative terms, here the master treats his servant rather ambivalently. On several occasions, especially when Jupiter mistakes his right from left, which hinders the treasure hunt, Legrand shouts insults such as "scoundrel" or "infernal black villain!" (Poe 286). Cursing him for stupidity, he even threatens him with physical violence. However, apart from these sporadic instances of fury, the master generally treats his servant nicely, calls him "good old Negro" or "poor old Jup" (Poe 276), and recognizes his well-intended demeanor.

On the other hand, Jupiter is devotedly faithful to Legrand. Apart from refusing to leave him, he earnestly worries about his master's well-being and is always there for him. Subserviently, just like Pompey, he always does as ordered although Legrand's frantic reactions sometimes frighten him. "'What de matter now, massa?' said Jup, evidently shamed into compliance; 'always want for to raise fuss wid old nigger'", the narrator reports on an occasion in the story (Poe 281). Evidently aware of his permanent social status, Jupiter even resorts to self-deprecation by applying to himself the offensive term "nigger".

In addition to economic, “scientific” and religious reasons, the justification of slavery was deeply rooted in the paternalistic argument that was ardently used by the defenders of the system. According to that argument, as Rodriguez confirms, slaves were seen as ignorant and dependent children that needed to be governed. Mimicking the parent-child relationship, white masters thus exercised social control over their slaves; however, such a relationship was seemingly marked by affection and reciprocity of both parties (117-18). The mutual allegiance of Legrand and Jupiter is reminiscent of such communication. In that sense, their relationship echoes the peculiar “psychopolitics of the master/slave relationship, a bond whose sentimentalized image was at the heart of the South's proslavery rhetoric” (Ginsberg 99). However, as Jupiter is not always *that* obedient and affectionate, Poe's intention might have been otherwise – to undermine the premise of slavery in its master-slave relational aspect.

By temporarily transgressing the normative behavior that his role implies, Jupiter at one point threatens to flog his master for being absent for an entire day. “I had a big stick ready cut for to gib him d—d good beating when he did come—but Ise sich a fool dat I hadn't de heart arter all” (Poe 276), he tells the narrator. The earlier implied symbolic master-slave role reversal here appears in a more manifest form. This carnivalesque shift, aside from mirroring the brutal practice of slave whippings in the antebellum period, also supports the reading of the ambivalent relationship between Legrand and Jupiter as yet another way in which Poe, by presenting the servant's behavior as disobedient and potentially threatening, undercuts and satirizes the grounds on which slavery rests. This time, he does so by showing how the paternalistic argument does not hold water when it comes to justifying slavery. Finally, the implied reversal also carries a strong subtextual message that black slaves have the potential of violently turning against their white owners (Zitter 58). Could this have been the expression of the antebellum anxiety over slave rebellions? Let us see how the following tale answers that question.

#### 4.5. "Hop-Frog" (1848)

As opposed to the previous two tales where the black characters are presented directly, in this tale Poe makes it slightly more challenging to discover what Morrison has termed the Africanist presence. However, if "Hop-Frog" is read carefully, the violent interplay between the abusive king and the subdued jester appears analogous to the relationship between white owners and black slaves, with the present tropes of blackness supporting such a reading. Moreover, since the jester vengefully murders his master, in this literarily "envisioned revenge for the national sin of slavery", Poe reconstitutes such master-slave power relations (Dayan, "Amorous Bondage" 258). Therefore, this tale is widely read as Poe's allusion to the Southern anxieties over slave rebellions. Having been published in an antislavery newspaper from Boston, it can also be considered as Poe's response to abolitionist narratives and his sympathy for black slaves or, conversely, as Jones disputes, as a critique of such narratives.

On a spatially unspecified court, a nameless king and his seven minister, portrayed as "large corpulent, oily men" (Poe 215), derive enormous enjoyment from making practical jokes, especially when they involve brutally making fun of their court jester Hop-Frog. As the narrator makes known, at the date of his narrative, "several of the great continental 'powers' still retained their 'fools'" (Poe 215). Already at the opening the story, Poe makes an implicit comparison between the kingdom of his imaginary monarch and the United States. More indicatively, as he temporally frames the narrative probably alluding to the date of the tale's production, he uses the word "still" to refer to the fact that America was still, at the time, a slave-holding country. Moreover, by referring to it with the word "power" written in quotation marks, once again he satirizes the notion of the American self-identified political grandeur. Correspondingly, by also putting the word "fool" in quotation marks, he not only prefigures the fact that Hop-Frog is, as later revealed, far from such a qualification, but also implies that slaves too should not be regarded condescendingly.

What makes the character of Hop-Frog comparable to black slaves is reflected in his name, origin, and physical appearance. Firstly, the narrator believes that he was not originally given the name of Hop-Frog at baptism, but was later named against his will. Assuming his new name, as well as his new role at the court, the jester was also obliged to wear motley with caps and bells. Secondly, both he and Trippetta, a young girl who is also there to amuse the rulers, “had been forcibly carried off from their respective homes” (Poe 216). As Forbes notes, not only were Africans taken from their homes and deprived of freedom by force, they were also given new names and clothes, and sometimes even branded, as symbolic rituals that detached them from their previous lives and social identities (44). The obscurity of Hop-Frog’s place of origin is also indicative as the narrator states that “[i]t was some barbarous region, however, that no person ever heard of—a vast distance from the court of our king” (Poe 216). However, while reading the tale as a portrayal of slavery, it is not difficult to pinpoint the unidentified region as Africa, the domicile continent of African-American slaves.

To interpret the tale as a slave narrative becomes even easier if taking into account the physical depiction of the jester. Not only is Hop-Frog expected to instantaneously produce sharp witticism for the king’s amusement, but his entertaining potential is also derived from him being a dwarf and a cripple. Described as moving with “a sort of an interjectional gait—something between a leap and a wriggle”, Hop-Frog is also presented as having “a prodigious muscular power”, as being amazingly dexterous, “especially when trees or ropes were in question, or anything else to climb”, and even as resembling “a small monkey” (Poe 216). At first, as Jones suggests, Hop-Frog is described in the manner that “equates him with antebellum slaves” (“Danger of Sympathy” 245). Moreover, such a stereotypical portrayal is consistent with the degrading antebellum practice of comparing black slaves with primates.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Western studies of race established pseudo-scientific connections between primates and Africans, and “orangutans were deemed the most

appropriate analogues for blacks” (Dayan 258). As Peterson reports, by equating the biological characteristics of Negroes with those of primates, scientists often presented blacks as being naturally bestial, and as occupying a lower hierarchical rank than whites. With such a “doctrine of black animality”, the official racist ideology found another convenient alibi to justify slavery<sup>12</sup> (156-57). Even the abolitionist David Walker wrote in his famous antislavery document: “Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under their feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes of Monkeys or Orang-Outans?”<sup>13</sup> (qtd. in Rodriguez 583). With these facts in mind, it sounds downright plausible when Dayan says that in this tale, “Poe literalizes what natural historians perceived as bestial similitude and prophesies the apocalypse of ‘servile’ war so feared by Southerners” (258).

The king’s brutal treatment of Hop-Frog, as well as Trippetta, serves as another piece of evidence that Poe engaged in a literary presentation of slavery. Upon asking of Hop-Frog to devise the characters for the upcoming court masquerade, the repugnant monarch orders him to drink a lot of wine, even though he is aware of the jester’s intolerance of alcohol. As presented, alcohol excites him “almost to madness; and madness is no comfortable feeling” (Poe 217), but the king will stop at nothing when it comes to his amusement. Again, Poe evokes the conditions of slavery while presumably responding to abolitionist narratives. For example, in reference to the maltreatment of his master Convoy, Frederick Douglass wrote: “I was completely wrecked, changed, and bewildered; goaded almost to madness at one time, and at another reconciling myself to my wretched condition”<sup>14</sup> (qtd. in Rodriguez 597). The jester’s provoked madness certainly seems similar to Douglass’ state of mind. Through such a relationship between the violent king and the tortured jester, Poe manages to racialize them both.

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<sup>12</sup> Peterson presents this information in his reading of the detective story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) as an allegory of black animality. In that story, two white women are killed by an escaped orangutan, so many critics interpret the ape-murderer as a metaphor for a black slave who has violently turned against whites.

<sup>13</sup> David Walker was an ardent anti-slavery figure who wrote *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) in which he openly invited black people to fight against oppression (Rodriguez 583).

<sup>14</sup> As an escaped slave and an avid black activist, Frederick Douglass produced several abolitionist narratives, including the famous *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), an autobiography which entails his past experiences under slavery. Douglass was the most prominent former slave of the antebellum period (Rodriguez 264).

That the king is extremely ill-humored is once again proven when he violently pushes Trippetta and throws wine in her face, to which Hop-Frog grates in anger. However, he soon restores his sobriety and proceeds to present the king with the concept of “the Eight Chained Ourang-Outangs”, as being “one of his country’s frolics” (Poe 219). The idea is to dress the king and the ministers as monkeys, so that they frighten the guests of the masquerade who will mistake them for real beasts. Relishing the prospect of a successful prank, the king immediately acquiesces while being blissfully unaware that he jester is, in fact, secretly plotting a frightful revenge. Hop-Frog then tars the eight men and covers them in flax, making them closely resemble “the ferocious-looking creatures” that reside in the uncivilized world (Poe 221). Not only is the jester already placing the masters into his own ape-like position, but this moment of tarring and flaxing them is by itself reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup>-century blackface minstrel shows in which white actors wore theatrical makeup in order to imitate blacks and entertain the audience – just like Hop-Frog was required to amuse the courtiers. At this point, the white race has been purposefully blackened.

Furthermore, after masking his masters into apes, Hop-Frog ties them together with a chain that goes around each one of their waists, mimicking the practice of “those who capture Chimpanzees, or other large apes, in Borneo” (Poe 221). Evidently, the jester is eager in his intention to reduce them to his own position of a slave who was probably also captured in his African homeland in such a manner. After the chained “apes” appear in the saloon at first bewildering but then amusing the guests, he then hooks them onto a chain suspended from the ceiling, lifts them up in the air so that their bodies are dangling upside down, and climbs “with an agility of a monkey” (Poe 222) above their bodies, thus finally assuming a superior position. As he is now in control of the situation while the king and his men are defenseless – just like himself and Trippetta used to be – Hop-Frog manages to reverse the roles of masters and slaves, compelling the former to experience his own misfortunate conditions.

However, Hop-Frog's retaliation is not yet complete as he first declares his reasons for such an action: "I now see *distinctly*," he said, "what manner of people these maskers are. They are a great king and his seven privy-councillors— a king who does not scruple to strike a defenceless girl, and his seven councillors who abet him in the outrage. As for myself, I am simply Hop-Frog, the jester—and *this is my last jest.*" (Poe 223). Prior to ultimately freeing himself by fleeing with Trippetta, the jester makes his final move and sets the men ablaze with a torch, causing them to burn to death. "The eight corpses swung in their chains, a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass" (Poe 223-24), the narrator says.

The merciless masters are blackened two times – once with tar, and once by fire. As Person points out, by thus playing with the symbol of black color, Poe delineates "a racially charged exchange of positions" and "plays with white racial fears" of black revenge ("Philosophy of Amalgamation" 219). Those fears were fueled by the relatively common occurrence of slave rebellions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Virginia, the most (in)famous case being the violently extinguished insurrection led by Nat Turner in 1831, in which sixty white people were killed (Smith 64). Following Turner's rebellion, Southern slave-owners grew frightful that their slaves would turn against them and assume their places. In "Hop-Frog", as Rowe suggests, Poe justifies Negro rebellions by implying that the rulers are the ones who are dark and bestial, so they suffer the deserved punishment (98).

Indeed, by blackening the masters, Poe "externalizes their bestial natures" (Sova 81). Despite Hop-Frog's exaggerate vengeance, it is not the slaves but the cruel masters whom he bestializes and whose behavior he judges. By symbolically imposing on them the fate of blackness, he invites white readers to consider what it would be like if they were in a black slave's place. By also implying that slaves rebel not because their race is a natural given that makes them atrocious but because of their dire social conditions, Poe might have subtly aligned himself with the tradition of abolitionist narratives, proverbially avoiding to be clear.

However, Jones offers a somewhat alternative view on the story as he believes it to be revealing Poe's criticism of abolitionist narratives, and projecting his *own* fear over slave rebellions. As he notes, during the 1830s and 1840s, the abolitionist movement produced countless pathos-ridden slave narratives and other types of texts (articles, sermons, novels, etc.) portraying the cruelty of white owners and consequent slave sufferings. The aim of this rhetorical strategy was to appeal to the white readers' emotions and elicit compassion for black slaves, hopefully turning them against slavery. However, Jones further contends that, in "Hop-Frog", Poe offers a more sophisticated response to such narratives, warning its readers of their inherent potential to instigate slave rebellions (243-44).

As he argues, the malevolent and abusive king, on an occasion referred to as "the tyrant" and "the monster" (Poe 218), is demonized as an agent of brutality, which invites the readers to disprove of his character. Conversely, with his grotesque primate-like physique being redolent of the antebellum images that dehumanize Negroes, the victimized Hop-Frog provokes sympathy, at least initially. Presented by the narrator as "the poor dwarf" and "poor fellow", the jester is ridiculed to such an extent that he sighs and wells up in tears when the king forces him to drink "to the health of [his] absent friends" on a day that happens to be his birthday (Poe 217-18). In Jones's opinion, through such a relationship between the monstrous master and the innocent slave whose portrayal invokes excessive sentiment, Poe at first mimics the pathos of abolitionist narratives. However, he believes that the tale soon turns into a complete parody of such sentimental rhetoric (246-47).

Expanding on that notion, Jones refers to the parts of the story in which Hop-Frog reveals his true nature. As the jester at first acts normally, he compares him to real-life slaves who "became unreadable text to their owners who were often deceived by smiles, song and humour" (249). It is only when he displays his "set of large, powerful, and very repulsive teeth" (Poe 219) that his hidden intentions are foreshadowed. Intentionally misdirecting the

readers at the beginning, Poe finally presents the shocking denouement in which Hop-Frog violently usurps mastery from his owners by executing the premeditated revenge of chaining and torching them, all the while grinning with “an expression of maniacal rage” (Poe 223). Jones sees this twist as Poe’s message not to think of slaves only as innocent and helpless victims – they too are capable of inflicting inhumane atrocities upon others and abusing the position of power once they have attained it. For this reason, he argues that the story not only reveals Poe’s concerns over slave rebellions, but also illustrates the dangers of sentimentalist rhetoric which might mislead its readers to align themselves with black slaves and ignore the potentially alarming consequences of the abolitionist propaganda (249-51).

Finally, Jones concludes that “‘Hop-Frog’ ultimately reaffirms the status quo by arguing that slavery, despite some masters’ abusive behavior, is preferable to giving slaves freedom and the means for violent retribution” (254). However, given the historical circumstances, could the jester’s vengeance be justified? Is it just a heinous act of “black” retaliation or could it be interpreted as an achievement of poetic justice? Gottesman, for example, insists that the story does not emphasize “Black perfidy”, but shows “the dialectic of omnipotence and helplessness, oppression and revolt, injury and retribution” (140). As he adds, Poe, in fact, rather sympathetically echoes the nightmare presented in the narratives of Nat Turner and other leaders of slave rebellions (142). However, far from being apologetic of vindictive violence, it might be that Poe simply *understood* the slaves’ motives behind such rebellions. After all, they *did* only want to attain one thing – their freedom. What Jones, then, fails to observe is that the writer was probably aware that African-American slaves would not have felt the need to resort to violence had they been free in the first place and had they had any other choice. Therefore, it could also be that Poe acknowledged the historical certainty that the oppressed people will eventually strive to change their unenviable position – regardless of their race. The following story corroborates such an assumption.

#### 4.6. “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1845)

By drawing a parallel between the treatment of psychiatric patients in 19<sup>th</sup>-century mental health facilities and the position of slaves, Poe subtly imbues another one of his tales with racial undertones. As he portrays the violent uprisings of the people confined in an asylum (whether they be the patients or the overthrown keepers), here too the writer presents the master-slave role reversal and addresses the issue of slave rebellions. Several aspects of the story add up to such an interpretation – the setting, the portrayal of inmates, and both the patients’ and the keepers’ insurrections. Though the tale is often seen as another parody of abolitionist principles, it can also be read as Poe’s attempt to raise the following question – what would slave-owners, or any other group of people in position of power, do if suddenly denied freedom? As he suggests, just like slaves, they too would rebel in trying to reclaim it.

While in “the extreme Southern provinces of France”, the narrator makes his way through an almost inaccessible “dank and gloomy wood” to visit a private asylum depicted as a fantastic and dilapidated *château* (Poe 359). Welcomed by the supposed superintendent Monsieur Maillard, he joins a group of odd people for dinner, not knowing they are actually patients who have overpowered and locked away their keepers in an act of rebellion. Being misled to believe that the people are Maillard’s friends and assistants, the narrator listens to their anecdotes about patients – in truth, about themselves – who imagined they were tea-pots, donkeys, cheese, frogs, and so on (Poe 366-67). By setting the story in Southern France, Poe makes an introductory analogy with the American South. As Kennedy observes, the writer thus injects “national subjects into foreign plots”, and evokes “the American subtext of sectional mistrust and antislavery debate” (“Mania for Composition” 15). The Gothic locale of a chateau, in Dayan’s opinion, serves as a connection between a madhouse and a plantation, while the patients’ depersonalizations suggest Poe’s knowledge of “their source in the thorny legal discourse of slaves as chattel” (“Poe, Persons, and Property” 108).

Aside from having peculiar delusions, the narrator's hosts describe the patients in words such as "lunatic", "raging maniac", "great fool", "ignoramus" or "madman" (Poe 362-68). In actuality, they are making self-referential remarks with the purpose of concealing their true identities; however, they might also be ironically pointing out the public perception of psychiatric patients. This is also presented at the very beginning of the story as the narrator's companion, who escorts him to the premises, refuses to enter the asylum pleading "a very usual horror at the sight of a lunatic" (Poe 359). However, besides ostensibly problematizing the issue of insanity, Poe is also alluding to the stigmatized perception of black slaves. As Dayan detects, for Poe, "madhouse and plantation were synonymous in 'treating' those who, once branded as nonpersons, have forfeited all claims to individual rights" (108). However, since the patients rebelled against their keepers, they have not quite forfeited those claims.

As the evening progresses, Maillard informs the narrator about the so-called "soothing system", which was well known in Paris. The system was such "that all punishments were avoided—that even confinement was seldom resorted to—that the patients, while secretly watched, were left much apparent liberty, and that most of them were permitted to roam about the house and grounds in the ordinary apparel of persons in right mind" (Poe 360). However, Maillard explains that the concept proved counterproductive as the patients "were often aroused by injudicious persons who called to inspect the house", adding that "[t]he *danger* of the soothing system was, at all times, appalling; and its advantages have been much over-rated" (Poe 361). According to Jones, this serves as yet another clue that Poe warns the readers against the dangers of abolitionist propaganda. As he elaborates, while Paris stands for Northern America, the "injudicious persons" Maillard mentions are, in fact, abolitionists who constantly encourage black slaves to rebel. Since the patients were given too much freedom, "they became susceptible to the ideas of revolution", which was "consistent with southerners' view of the institution as benevolent and paternalistic" (*Unwelcome Voices* 104).

Such a reading is supported by the fact that the patients staged a violent insurrection. As Maillard recounts, one day “the keepers found themselves pinioned hand and foot, and thrown into the cells, where they were attended, as if *they* were the lunatics, by the lunatics themselves, who had usurped the offices of the keepers” (Poe 373). Once again, the reversal of the socially constructed master-slave order has been achieved, as metaphorically presented in the rebellion. In Jones’s opinion, “Poe here appeals to a suspicion that that the institution of slavery as practiced by most southern slave owners might have become too lax to discourage a concerted effort by a group of slaves” (104). As Maillard further explains, the rebellion was the consequence of giving the patients too much freedom as they were able to cunningly hide their intentions. At first, he adds, the patients “behaved remarkably well—especially so—any one of sense might have known that some devilish scheme was brewing from that particular fact” (Poe 373). Thereby, as Kennedy observes, the “soothing” method “represents a parody of abolitionism in its elimination of restraint and reversal of master-slave relations” (16).

However, the irony lies in the fact that Maillard is talking about himself, as he was the one who instigated the rebellion once he, having lost both his mind and his position of the superintendant, became a patient. Thus, he narrates:

Fact—it all came to pass by means of a stupid fellow—a lunatic—who, by some means, had taken it into his head that he had invented a better system of government than any ever heard of before—of lunatic government, I mean. He wished to give his invention a trial, I suppose—and so he persuaded the rest of the patients to join him in a conspiracy for the overthrow of the reigning powers. (Poe 373)

The new system Maillard refers to is the system of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether, as he jokingly describes it to the unsuspecting narrator at one point in the story. In reality, it was the system of governance he applied to the conquered attendants who “were first well tarred, and then carefully feathered, and then shut up in underground cells” (Poe 376). Not only were the

masters, similarly to the courtiers in “Hop-Frog”, blackened by tar, they were also subjected to an act of humiliation that tarring and feathering represents.<sup>15</sup> As Sova observes, Poe here alludes to the common practice of punishing the northern abolitionist caught in the South (166). However, since the masters are the ones who received punishment, the writer redirects the aim of such a practice towards slave-owners, as embodied in the keepers.

The presented patients’ revolution is, in Jones’s view, problematic for two reasons. Firstly, he believes that the reversal of roles has not been completely achieved since the patients fail to successfully impersonate the masters. This is presented in the story when the narrator gets confused with their appearance and behavior. On the one hand, they appear high-cultured, well-mannered and “certainly of high breeding” (Poe 364). However, he also notices how bizarre they seem with their flamboyant garments, excessive jewelry, overindulgence in the lavish dinner and queer behavior. At one point, he says he was informed in Paris “that the southern provincialists were a peculiarly eccentric people, with a vast number of antiquated notions” (364). Although this may be read as Poe’s mockery of the Southern genteel class from an abolitionist standpoint, Jones sees the depiction of the inmates as being in favor of the proslavery argument that African Americans are not socially equipped to deal with freedom. Without paternalistic structure to control them, as the argument goes, slaves would be immoderate like children without parental supervision. Since the characters behave unnaturally, Jones believes that Poe supports the Southern belief that slaves are incapable of living as masters, thus presenting the first consequence of abolition. The second problem of the patients’ revolution is, in Jones’s opinion, the fact that they not only freed themselves, but also cruelly captured their masters. Therefore, the second potential consequence of abolition is the rise of the oppressed that results in the tyrannical subjugation of the oppressor (103-06).

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<sup>15</sup> Tarring and feathering involves stripping the victims to their waist, pouring them with tar, and then covering them with feathers. Originating in feudal Europe, such a practice was often employed in the colonial America as a form of public humiliation aimed against political opponents. During the Jacksonian period, it was often resorted to by anti-abolitionist mobs that would thus punish their rivals (Rodriguez 170).

However, as convincingly as Jones presents his argument, this story can also be interpreted differently. For that purpose, the keeper's counterrevolution needs to be taken under consideration. At one point during the dinner, the narrator and his hosts realize that the confined people are trying to break loose. Inserting the Gothic sensations of fear and horror in his characters, Poe presents the chaotic sequence of events in which the real keepers break into the room and overpower the patients, eventually restoring the previous order. As the narrator recounts, while "fighting, stamping, scratching, and howling, there rushed a perfect army of what I took to be Chimpanzees, Ourang-Outangs, or big black baboons of the Cape of Good Hope" (Poe 375). Conquered and enslaved, the masters were literally pushed into the position of slaves. However, tarred and feathered into resembling ape-like creatures, they were also put in that position metaphorically. Much like in "Hop-Frog", the fate of blackness was thus imposed upon the masters, only here, they became "bestial" and violent when forced to face the previously unknown conditions. Once they found themselves where usually slaves are, the masters did exactly what slaves do – they rebelled in order to reclaim their freedom. Therefore, this story might be read as Poe's message that the oppressed will eventually try to seek their freedom, regardless of their race but dependant on their social circumstances.

There is yet another fact that bolsters such a reading. Because his "insanity" had degraded him to a slave-like position, Maillard felt the need to restore his previous rank, so he instigated the insurrection. All of a sudden, once applied to himself, "the soothing system" no longer worked. The master-turned-slave saw what it was like on the other side, and decided to change his situation through the only means available to those who are not completely free – by rebelling. Far from inherently possessing violent traits, the former superintendant rose against oppression only because his circumstances left him with no other choice. Due to that fact, this reading lends support to Kennedy's claim that, in this story, "Poe suggests that denial of freedom ensures reprisal and disorder" (16).

Whereas Kennedy does, building his argument similarly as Jones, partially interpret this story as a parody of abolitionism, he nonetheless goes a step further and recognizes its other underlying message. On the one hand, he argues, the depiction of the former patients as delusional supports the reading of this tale as Poe's judgment of abolitionist efforts to emancipate slaves. However, on the other hand, since the confined keepers also rebelled in a disorderly fashion, the tale also reveals Poe's awareness that, when it comes to slavery of any kind, insurrections are inevitable. Due to such contradictory messages, Kennedy wonders if this tale is "a simple warning about the dangers of abolitionist reform or a more complicated critique of American political hypocrisy" (16-17).

As both readings are possible, this story might serve as another piece of evidence that Poe aimed at satisfying both the northern and southern readership, as Whalen often argues. However, as much as it is difficult to pinpoint his exact intention, the writer here addresses important problems of the politically troubled society torn between abolitionism and slavery. Although Poe may not have had an unquestionably abolitionist mindset, he was nevertheless understanding of the position of slaves and their need to fight for freedom. In this story, he proves such tendencies – not by equating slavery with madness, but by figuratively linking the position of the mentally ill to the one of slaves.

#### 4.7. "The Black Cat" (1843)

Poe's figurative slaves are not only crippled dwarfs and psychiatric patients. Both mimicking and mocking the dehumanizing proslavery argument that equated slaves with primates, the writer also occasionally presented them as apes. However, in this story, he uses the trope of a domesticated animal in order to address the position of the most underprivileged group of the antebellum society. The animal in question is arguably the best-known literary cat, which – far from coincidentally – happens to be black. While the black color fittingly

serves the purpose of producing Gothic aesthetics, it also bears covert social connotations. As Person reasons, through the racially coded use of color that denotes the Africanist presence, Poe challenges the readers to interpret the narrator's behavior towards his pet as yet another metaphor for slaveholder's treatment of their slaves ("Philosophy of Amalgamation" 215-16).

Being one of Poe's most famous stories, "The Black Cat" is the ultimate tale of horror that fits the definition of the Gothic in its narrowest sense and follows the conventions of the genre. Through the portrayal of the narrator's gradual descent into insanity and his murderous disposition that makes him victimize both his wife and his cat, Poe explores psychological issues such as alcoholism and deviant behavior. In the process, he uses numerous Gothic tropes – madness, terror, fear, phantasm, murder, death, and so on. However, through these motifs, he also addresses social phenomena, mostly pertaining to domestic violence and the treatment of slaves. As Ginsberg notes, "the relationship of pet to pet owner was understood by antebellum Americans as a trope for both slavery and domesticity" (110).

Ginsberg reads this tale as a parody of proslavery fiction that heavily sentimentalized the relationship between white masters and their African-American subordinates, especially after Nat Turner's revolt. As she reports, the famous rebellion provoked both fearful and hateful reactions in Southern slave-owners who launched many rhetorical counterattacks, whether through fierce debates against emancipation in Virginian legislature or in the form of proslavery fiction. In such fiction, southerners presented happy slaveholding families whose masters formed affectionate bonds not only with subservient Negroes but also with domesticated animals. By means of pet-keeping tropes, domestication became a metaphorical model for the enslavement of the racial "other" (102-13).

In "The Black Cat", Poe at first echoes such romanticized dependency. Claiming to have been docile and kind-hearted, the narrator professes his (past) love for animals as the chief source of pleasure. Along with his wife, he used to live in a pet-loving household with

“birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and *a cat*” (Poe 193). Pluto, the cat, was his favorite pet whom he fed and who followed him around wherever he went. Even later, when another cat appears in the story as Pluto’s counterpart, the already deranged narrator first caresses it and allows it to follow him home. The other cat also shows ultimate attachment to its owner while purring, rubbing itself against the narrator’s hand, and soon becoming domesticated. So far, everything seems to evoke the sentimentalized master-slave relationship. At one point, the narrator even states: “There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere *Man*” (Poe 192).

Through such “devastating mockery of southern sentimentality” (Ginsberg 117), Poe only prefigures what he will later more blatantly reveal. As Ginsberg further notes, similarly to the relationship between Legrand and Jupiter in “The Gold-Bug”, Poe here, though much more extensively and radically, questions the romanticized vision of paternal slave-owners and devoted slaves. The associative connection between the Negro servant and the black cat lies not only in their loyalty but also in their names – just as the former is named Jupiter after a Roman god, the latter’s name of Pluto also bears a grandiose God-like connotation, this time derived from Greek mythology (117-18).

Poe’s mockery of the paternalistic relationship is evident in the narrator’s treatment of his pets and his out-of-control savagery. Degenerating from a tender care-taker into a raging alcoholic prone to violent outburst, the narrator soon begins to molest his pets, and occasionally his wife. One night, while drunk and furious, he seizes Pluto who reacts frightfully and bites him on the hand. Just like Jupiter who wanted to flog Legrand, the cat also temporarily renounces its loyalty. The demonically enraged narrator then commits an unfathomable atrocity and plucks out the cat’s eye with a knife. Yet, he does not stop there. Completely overtaken by “the spirit of PERVERSENESS”, he murders the cat: “One morning

in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;—hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart” (Poe 194).

As Thomas Jefferson wrote, “[t]he whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other” (qtd. in Person 215). Since the narrator’s horrific abuse of his pet(s) figures prominently as a metaphor for despotism towards slaves, his cruelty “can be read as a cynical response to the sentimental representations of the pleasures of domestic subservience” (Ginsberg 113). Not only does Poe cynically react to such proslavery fiction, but he also refers to both the historical occurrence of slave lynching and the slave narratives that reflect it. As slaves were sometimes whipped, incinerated or, like Poe’s cat, hanged for disobedience and revolt, many slave narratives portrayed horrific acts of beatings and lynching to discourage the public from rooting for slavery (Rodriguez 372). Therefore, it might be that Poe wrote “The Black Cat” with the same intention. With the use of his brutal narrator, he evidently “refuses to maintain the popular Southern boundary between white civility and black barbarism” (Person 220).

Through the narrator’s moral disintegration, Poe delves into the human psyche and its most terrible processes in order to reveal a more socially significant psychology of power. As the narrator radically deteriorates due to the “Fiend Intemperance” of alcohol abuse (Poe 193), the intoxication of his absolute power over the black cat echoes the intemperate abuses of white slaveholding power over black slaves (Ginsberg 106; Person 216). In that sense, his possession by the spirit of perverseness mirrors the perverseness of the master-slave relationship. Since he abuses and kills his cat, eventually doing the same to his wife by burying an axe in her head, this tale also explores the psychology of white male racism that manifests itself through familial tyranny targeted at both black slaves and white women (Ginsberg 118-19; Person 216). Therefore, “The Black Cat” not only points to the social

inequalities of the slaveholding concept, but it also “reproduces the structural inequalities of the antebellum family” (Ginsberg 119). Both murders, thereby, may be read as dehumanizing consequences of the social maladies present in 19<sup>th</sup>-century United States. However, while only superficially touching upon the position of women through a brief portrayal of patriarchal violence, Poe here examines the issue of race in great detail. Moreover, as the story mostly focuses on the narrator’s guilt-ridden yet persistently violent psyche, the writer not only deals with the position of blacks, but he also portrays how slavery influences white slave-owners. As Morrison points out, it is equally important to consider how racial ideology affects slaves *and* what it “does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (12).

Following the cat’s killing, the narrator becomes tormented by its phantasm. Though he declares to have felt only a glimpse of remorse, the post-crime guilt starts tearing him apart subconsciously. After a typically Gothic scene in which his house burns down, on the only remaining wall amidst the ruins the narrator sees as if graven “upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*”, with a rope around its neck (Poe 195). Although he finds a rational explanation for that occurrence, it is more likely that his guilt made him experience the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia. With the black image on the white wall, Poe once again uses color coding to indicate racial relations. However, the placement of the element of blackness onto a predominantly white surface – indicating black presence in the dominant white American society – soon gets completely reversed. Perpetually haunted by the image of Pluto, the drunken narrator finds another black cat of an unknown origin, which resembles his first pet in all aspects but one – whereas Pluto was completely black, “this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast” (Poe 195). As opposed to the previous instance, there is now an inscription of whiteness on the black body of the cat. Therefore, Person suggests that such an inversion of colors denotes the conversion of master-slave identities – the narrator is the one who is now a slave (217).

The narrator's state of mind lends extensive support to Person's claim. Disgusted by Pluto's ominous *doppelgänger* that is constantly around, he feels the need to "destroy it with a blow"; however, he refrains from doing so, partly because of the memory of the previous crime, but chiefly due to the "absolute *dread* of the beast" (Poe 197). Evidently reminding him of his own guilt, the cat has absolutely terrified the narrator. In accordance with Person's view, Leverenz also suggests role reversal – instead of the narrator, the second black cat is now the head of the household (119). His fear is further enhanced by the "mark of white hair", which gradually spreads into "the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the GALLOWS!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!" (Poe 197). According to Person, this sinister white mark is, on the one hand, suggestive of amalgamation, i.e. "racial crossbreeding that, by initiating the 'whitening' process, portends the erasure of visible color differences" (217). However, by using the provocative symbol shaped as gallows, Poe dramatizes not the erasure of the black race, but white racial violence and accompanying guilt – as much as the narrator feels haunted by his crime, so are white masters haunted by the guilt of their treatment of slaves (218-20).

There is yet another way of interpreting the narrator's relentless fear of the cat. In Ginsberg's opinion, Poe relies on "the aesthetics of the gothic sublime" in portraying the narrator's horror so as to literarily reproduce the Southern dread of slave rebellions that Nat Turner's revolt provoked (116). The story is, indeed, imbued with such aesthetics. Apart from the narrator's reaction to the white mark on the cat's chest, he refers to his pet nemesis in many derogatory expressions such as "monster", "*a brute beast*", "tormentor", "*the thing*", "detested creature", and even "incarnate Night-Mare" (Poe 197-99). Completely deranged, his mind even starts producing "the darkest and most evil of thoughts" (Poe 198). With such elaborate Gothicism, as Ginsberg sees it, Poe alludes to another "Night-Mare" – the nightmare of southern masters who started regarding each slave as a potential threat to their slaveholding

households. As she elaborates, the way the narrator feels about the second cat is reminiscent of white master's suspicion of their slaves. More specifically, Poe employs the fear-inducing and menacing pet in order to mock the southerners who were afraid that every Negro slave could suddenly become a new Nat Turner. Therefore, as Ginsberg concludes, "the gothic exaggerations of the narrator's drama with a dark animal whom he owns allow [Poe's] story to be read as the nightmarish return of the South's inescapable repressions" (116-17). Taking Ginsberg's analysis into account, it certainly seems that Poe produced yet another story conducive to historicizing the Gothic.

Finally, Poe concludes "The Black Cat" by punishing the narrator for his crimes. While trying to conceal the murder of his wife by burying her body in the wall of the cellar, the narrator also accidentally buries the dreaded pet. Being still alive during the police's inspection of the house, the cat eventually betrays him with a "wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell" (Poe 200). Since the narrator thus ends up in prison awaiting his death sentence, the conclusion of the tale enables its reading not only as another instance of black revenge, but also as Poe's message that white masters deserve proper punishment for their violent acts. Conveying that point, Poe ends his tale with the trope of live burial, a Gothic motif he often used in his stories in order to produce sensationalism, but also to make broader social insights. One of such tales is "The Premature Burial", another exemplary Gothic story that exposes the dire consequences of slavery.

#### 4.8. "The Premature Burial" (1844)

With a suggestive title to begin with, this tale is dedicated to the theme of live burial in its entirety. Extensively relying on Gothic imagery, Poe offers another view into the tormented psyche of the customary unknown narrator, who is here afraid of being buried prematurely. As the narrator alleges, "*no* event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the

supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death” (Poe 63). However, besides rather openly evoking the psychological implications of this morbid fear, the story also exposes some “covert social destabilizations” that were entrenched in American culture (Leverenz 97). Firstly, it reflects the 19<sup>th</sup>-century public fear of being buried alive, which Poe exploited to produce sensationalist fiction. Secondly, the trope of live burial, as Forbes sees it, may be understood as a metaphor for slavery, the latter being a form of social death, rather than physical one. Once again, Poe’s story is laden with political and cultural subtext.

Prior to recounting a few instances of live burial, the narrator qualifies the boundaries between life and death as “shadowy and vague”, and refers to some well-known diseases that cause “total cessation of all the apparent functions of vitality” (Poe 57). Consequently, as he continues, this leads to very frequent occurrences of premature interments, and such cases are widely reported in “the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience” (Poe 57-58). As Sova observes, Poe playfully fictionalizes the 19<sup>th</sup>-century public hysteria over being buried alive, a fear that was fed by popular narratives<sup>16</sup> (15). Between the 1810s and 1840s, the popular press abounded in live burial narratives, including both Gothic fiction and allegedly factual accounts (Forbes 33). The narrator then, in a pseudo-journalistic manner, reports several purportedly truthful accounts of people who were buried alive, all of them sharing a similar destiny of being in a condition resembling death, but none of them actually dying.

Aside from mirroring the widespread cultural anxiety over live burials and drawing on that fear to produce Gothic sensations, Poe presumably had another hidden agenda – to insinuate that African-American slaves were in a position that closely resembled death. Though their death may not have been physical, as they were enslaved, exploited, dehumanized, and politically and culturally marginalized, they were, in fact – socially dead.

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<sup>16</sup> Mangham reports that this collective paranoia emerged as a consequence of the cholera epidemics and an insufficient medical knowledge of the time. Since medical test often fell short in determining the vital functions of comatose or unconscious patients, the fear of being buried alive ran rampant. Such a fear instigated the production of many tales that dealt with the subject of live burial (13).

In that sense, Forbes establishes a connection between the trope of live burial and the position of slaves, describing the latter as a metaphorical “social death”<sup>17</sup>. While using this metaphor as another means of criticizing slavery, Poe characteristically permeated his tale with Gothic imagery (32-34).

Indeed, the tale extensively evokes Gothic sensations. For instance, the narrator refers to the experience of live burial as “[t]he unendurable oppression of the lungs—the stifling fumes of the damp earth—the clinging to the death garments—the rigid embrace of the narrow house—the blackness of the absolute Night—the silence like a sea that overwhelms”, adding that there is nothing so “agonizing upon Earth” and imaginable even “in the nethermost Hell” (Poe 63). Later on, as a different narrative style is employed and the narrator switches from the reports of live burials to his own story, he describes his ordeal of a catalepsy sufferer. “For weeks, all was void, and black, and silent, and Nothing became the universe” (Poe 64), he says about his death-like state during an attack of catalepsy. Both the symbols of “blackness/darkness/night” and “silence” appear as recurrent motifs throughout the story. Not only does Poe thus allude to the skin color of the socially dead slaves, but also to their dreadful situation: being surrounded by the metaphorical darkness that signifies their social position, they were forced to accept their circumstances and remain – silent.

Due to his condition that often renders him motionless, the narrator is perpetually horrified that he will be buried alive. Adhering to the conventions of the Gothic genre, Poe manages to project the narrator’s emotions onto the reader – his sheer terror, paralyzing fear, and excruciating agony. The analogy between the state of his mind affected by the illness and the social status of slaves can, thereby, be drawn. As much as the narrator is a slave to his own mind, African Americans were slaves to the white American society. However, whereas the narrator’s slavery is metaphorical, the slavery of black people was, very much so, literal.

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<sup>17</sup> As Forbes acknowledges, the relationship between slavery and social death was first established by Orlando Patterson who recognized slavery as a form of both physical and cultural violence (33).

Therefore, Poe effectively uses the metaphor of psychological illness in order to pinpoint slavery as a form of social illness that leads to its victims' inevitable social death.

Deprived of any joy whatsoever, the narrator's life becomes a mere preparation for his burial. Home-bound and panic-stricken, he obliges his friends not to bury his body until it has literally decomposed. His overpowering paranoia even causes him to take drastic measures as he remodels his family vault to be escapable. Besides equipping it with levers and enabling the free admission of air, he even inserts a bell so that he can be heard in case of a live burial (Poe 67-68). Accordingly, Sova informs about nonfiction accounts of people who instructed their families to test their bodies for any signs of life. Taken to extremes, their safety measures even included inserting air tubes in coffins and attaching bells to corpses (150-51). Again, the narrator's precautions reflect the 19<sup>th</sup>-century mass hysteria over premature burials.

Despite all the preventive actions, the narrator reports an occasion of awaking from catalepsy only to find himself confined within a small space that he believed was a grave:

I felt, too, that I lay upon some hard substance; and by something similar my sides were, also, closely compressed. So far, I had not ventured to stir any of my limbs—but now I violently threw up my arms ... They struck a solid wooden substance, which extended above my person at an elevation of not more than six inches from my face. I could no longer doubt that I reposed within a coffin at last. (Poe 68)

However, the desperate and hopeless narrator soon realized he had not been buried, but had merely fallen asleep in a small berth of a vessel anchored in the James River, near Richmond, Virginia. Both the ship and the Southern setting are here significant.

Because the vessel berth was so confined, the narrator mistook it for a coffin. Though presenting its measurements, he adds that such berths "need scarcely be described" (Poe 69). According to Forbes, the narrator's claustrophobic anecdote aims to evoke the confinement of a slave ship in the imagination of the readers, who were acquainted with both such a ship's

appearance and its purpose. As she suggest, Poe imitates “the experience of being stored, as cargo, for nightmarish transport from Africa to the Americas. The spaces occupied by slaves during the Middle Passage resembled ... coffins, and indeed slave ships were sometimes called ‘floating tombs’” (43). While subtly implying the hardships of African slaves who were shipped to America, Poe makes his narrator feel as if surrounded by “dark—all dark ... the intense and utter raylessness of the Night” (Poe 67-68). This symbol of darkness signals not only what slaves felt like in those ships, but also their impending social position. Therefore, Forbes concludes that slaves awakened to “the reality of a life under the shadow of social death”, the space of that death beginning in the holds of slave ships (44). The setting of this fictional event reinforces such a reading since the James River was first an international, and later a domestic slave-trade port. Similarly to Sullivan’s Island in “The Gold-Bug”, Poe’s spatial background of the story certainly does not seem like a random choice.

Furthermore, before realizing the truth, the narrator felt despondent about not being buried in his family vault by his friends, but by strangers whom he thought had buried him “as a dog—nailed up in some common coffin—and thrust, deep, deep, and for ever, into some ordinary and nameless grave” (Poe 68). Forbes interprets his “death” as yet another instance of Poe’s comparison to slaves. Dreading the debasing burial as a dog in a nameless grave, detached from his name, family and friends, the narrator felt he had lost his social identity. Much like kidnapped Negros aboard slave ships, “he awoke to feel himself socially dead” (44). Comparably to the portrayal of Hop-Frog with his assumed name and obscure origin, this story, though more covertly, also refers to the antebellum practice of giving slaves new names, as well as to other symbolic rituals that severed all the social ties to their previous lives. Therefore, through the narrator’s fear of an anonymous entombment, Poe exposes the terrifying effects of slavery – “one of his culture’s most powerful material and imaginative enactments of living death” (Forbes 46).

“The Premature Burial” may also be read as Poe’s criticism of how slavery betrayed the Enlightenment ideals. As the narrator states at the closure of the story, “[t]here are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of Hell” (Poe 70). For Poe, as Forbes acknowledges, slavery brought to light the contradiction in the official politics that proclaimed the ideal of equality and human rights, while simultaneously producing millions who were denied those rights. Therefore, he satirized the reliance on the liberal ideas of humanity, and used Gothic imagery to reveal the radical potential of social death by which many voices were silenced and which highlighted the spectral aspects of the national project (32-47). As Leverenz also notes, by pointing to slavery, Poe’s story “dramatizes the last failings of the Enlightenment reason” (97).

However, as thoroughly analyzed, Poe’s criticism of slavery, or any other political and cultural issue for that matter, needs to be unmasked. Yet, the writer himself sometimes provided hints as to how his stories ought to be read. This story, especially in its beginning, abounds in such cleverly interposed clues. Because those “instructions” may be applied to all the other presented tales, it is important, in the end, to discuss that point as well.

Though building up the reader’s anticipation of the narrator’s impending entombment, Poe creates an unexpected twist by leaving his character alive. As the latter’s self-fulfilling prophecy remains unfulfilled, the story is turned into a situational irony. The deliberately misguiding writer plays with the fear of live burial, and provides such an anticlimax to produce Gothic sensationalism and affect the reader. The horror story hence becomes a tall-tale and a hoax (Forbes 111; Sova 151). Throughout his literary career, Poe used hoaxes as a way of tackling social taboos while satisfying the unappreciative readership of the time. In the words of Whalen, "when neither fact nor fiction would do, Poe exploited the grey area in between by mastering the art – or perhaps the science – of the literary hoax" (“Poe and Publishing Industry” 64). In this story, the writer even directly makes a self-referential remark

when the narrator, having finally recovered from his fear, claims to no longer be reading “bugaboo tales—*such as this*” (69). However, though he does use this tongue-in-cheek comment that proves his tale is a hoax, the fact remains that it is precisely through such tales that Poe subtly addresses controversial topics such as slavery. The beginning of the story is, in that regard, even more telling.

In the opening of the story, the narrator calls attention to “certain themes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are too entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction. These the mere romanticist must eschew, if he do not wish to offend, or to disgust. They are with propriety handled, only when the severity and majesty of truth sanctify and sustain them” (Poe 57). These introductory lines open up an interesting interpretational framework in which the subsequently explored social themes may be positioned. By implying that certain themes are too horrible for fiction, Poe cunningly guides the reader to look beyond what is obvious – those themes are, in fact, presented covertly. Such an interpretation is supported with what the narrator does next. First, he mentions some real historical events, such as the Passage of the Beresina or the Massacre of St. Bartholomew. While doing so, he emphasizes that, as much as they “evoke pleasurable pain”, in those accounts “it is the fact – it is the reality – it is the history which excites”; however, “as inventions, we should regard them with simple abhorrence” (Poe 57). Even though Poe here acknowledges the sensationalist potential of horrendous historical events, he also disproves their use in fiction. Instead, he insists on addressing *individual* experiences, so his narrator goes on to report several allegedly truthful accounts of live burials, while claiming to have chosen specific instances of human suffering over general catastrophes because, thankfully, “the ghastly extremes of the agony are endured by man the unit, never by the man of mass” (Poe 57).

What Poe does in only two paragraphs is abundant in analytical possibilities. According to Leverenz, these opening lines have become “a paradigm for critical approaches

to Poe's sensationalism" (111). As he argues, Poe focuses on singular experiences of live burial in order to avoid the readers' repulsion over the dreadfulness of social traumas.

Moreover, as these personal accounts are presented as true facts, Poe recognizes that personal boundaries between life and death are more acceptable in fiction than the social boundaries between collective and individual horror. Leverenz therefore concludes that "[t]hrough personal dramas of life-in-death, forms of 'blackness' and 'silence' that would otherwise horrify or disgust genteel white antebellum readers can be put into words" (111-12).

In the light of Leverenz's analysis, it may be concluded that one of the collective traumas that Poe conceals behind individual experiences is, as shown, slavery. However, as the narrator stresses that the ghastly horrors are endured by "man the unit", it can also be deduced that the writer focuses on individual experiences not only to placate the readership, but also to show how, in the end, social traumas are endured by the very individuals of whom the oppressed groups consist. Therefore, in "The Premature Burial", he purposefully explores the micro-level of the social issues that bear far-reaching political and cultural implications. As much as he dismisses the fictional use of historical events, he nevertheless subtly addresses them while producing Gothic sensationalism.

On the whole, it seems that Poe managed to accomplish his two-fold endeavor – while he did produce this Gothic story so as to satisfy the readers and make his fiction successful on the literary market, he was still able to use his tale as a means of criticizing the socially unacceptable institutions and practices of the antebellum period. Not only this tale, for that matter, but also all the other tales that have here been analyzed.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To regard Edgar Allan Poe's short stories only as sensationalist tales that employ common Gothic motifs is to fail to notice the subtly communicated political and cultural implications that pervade their subtext. At first glance, viewed from the traditional critical perspective, Poe's stories might seem as mere effect-driven tales of horror. However, after careful consideration of the historical context in which they were created, they reveal themselves to be not only entertaining pieces of Gothic fiction, but also thoughtfully planned literary accounts that echo and criticize many troublesome issues of the antebellum America.

In this thesis, eight of Poe's tales have been analyzed within the framework of the revisionist critical approach that reads the controversial writer in a historical context. As shown, all the tales can be viewed as more or less subtle literary reflections of the conditions that shaped the society of Poe's day. As Kennedy suggests, "[w]hen the narrator of 'The Black Cat' buries an ax in his wife's brain or when Hop-Frog incinerates the king and his seven ministers dressed as apes, Poe anatomizes the psychology of revenge, flaunts atrocity, and depicts [America's] 'internal flaw'" (*Historical Guide* 5). Indeed, Poe ironically addresses different aspects of the "internal flaw" of his nation, especially with reference to the problem of race as the most prominent underside of the United States political agenda. Throughout the analyzed tales, he deals with the issue of race in different ways – by referring to the ideology of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, criticizing the belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, mocking the notion of the racial "other" and the pseudoscientific theories that support it, condemning Indian removal and slavery, or responding to the fear of slave rebellions. All the while, he subtly reveals his critical stance on the American official politics. Therefore, these tales can be viewed as his "ironic oppositional tactic of Americanizing the Gothic" (Kennedy, "Mania for Composition" 10).

When dealing with the political issues of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, Poe also responds to various cultural narratives, whether they be nationalistic discourses, captivity tales, abolitionist texts, or proslavery fiction. While also being critical of such narratives, the writer yet again proves his presumed authorial intent to cogently criticize his own society. Therefore, if his fiction is read with regard to all the presented political and cultural issues of the antebellum period, it becomes evident that Poe's tales are much more than just aesthetically inclined literary pieces produced with the aim of gaining profit.

As it has been shown, due to the politically divided readership and the editorial practices that required political neutrality, Poe was forced to hide his real attitudes while working for the magazines in which his tales were published. However, though he did try to successfully sell his fiction, he also managed to implicitly express his opinions by means of utilizing diverse literary signs and symbols that denote the presence of both African Americans – in the sense of Morrison's concept – and Native Americans. Although it is impossible to accurately determine his viewpoints on the basis of his biography, it is through his tales that his critical attitudes on the oppression of non-white people may be uncovered.

All things considered, in order to interpret Poe's Gothic tales in relation to the politics and culture of the antebellum America, it is both necessary to take into account the historical context of his life and to search for the literary tropes that refer to the social issues of the period. Through the analysis of eight of Poe's tales within the critical framework that considers the writer's work as involved with history, this thesis has proven how it is possible to reveal many hidden political and cultural implications when employing the approach of historicizing the Gothic. There are always new and creative ways to regard important literature, including the works by Edgar Allan Poe – one of America's most influential writers.

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## Abstract

For a long time, traditional critics read Edgar Allan Poe as an aesthete unconcerned with history and social issues of his day. However, recent years have given rise to a new critical current that regards his works in a historical context and considers the literary tropes that reveal socio-historical implications of the period in which he lived and created his fiction. Many such critics, following Toni Morrison's concept of the so-called "Africanist presence", read his fiction in pursuit of racial signifiers, as well as other codes that denote different political and cultural issues. In this thesis, Poe's tales are analyzed within the framework of this new revisionist approach that historicizes his fiction. More specifically, eight of his Gothic tales are read within the context of the antebellum America, whose practices and principles Poe presents and subtly criticizes. The analyzed tales are the following: "Some Words with a Mummy", "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains", "The Man That Was Used Up", "The Gold-Bug", "Hop-Frog", "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether", "The Black Cat", and "The Premature Burial". With the issue of race as the central point of examination, the analysis of the tales shows how Poe explores many aspects of American politics and culture, predominantly focusing on the oppression of black slaves and Native Americans. In that sense, he often alludes to slavery and Indian removal, placing those issues within a broader context of the imperialistic and expansionist practices of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. In the process of historicizing the Gothic, it is possible to uncover many political and cultural implications in Poe's literary pieces.

Key words: Poe, the Gothic, antebellum America, imperialism, Manifest Destiny, expansionism, slavery, Indian removal, blackness, whiteness, African American, Native American