

The CEA Forum

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AGONIZING POE

[Michael J. Kiskis](#)

I like a look of Agony,

Because I know it's true –

Men do no sham Convulsion,

Nor simulate, a Throe –

The eyes glaze once – and that is Death –

Impossible to feign

The Beads upon the Forehead

By homely Anguish strung.

~ Emily Dickinson, #339

I begin with a disclaimer: I am not a Poe scholar (which may become evident before too long). My specialty is Mark Twain. I began thinking seriously about Poe when I was invited to participate in a panel discussion on teaching Poe in the American survey course [\[1\]](#). I was invited as an outsider to Poe studies and to provide an outsider's perspective – a voice from the hinterlands, if you will. I have become more aware of my critical stance toward Poe as I have faced students who are overwhelmingly awed by and enthusiastic readers of Poe's writings. I have become more drawn to the difficulties I have in reading Poe as I have worked to detail the compelling relationship between reading and emotion in my work on Twain. Elsewhere, I have written about the clash between so-called “objective” reading and emotional response in Twain [\[2\]](#). Here I would like to consider why I react strongly and with a good deal of unsteadiness to Poe, in short why I agonize when I face students

and their expectations of Poe.

I teach Edgar Allan Poe over one full week each fall in the first part of the American literature survey (proportionally, that means he gets 1/12 of the time in the course). We usually devote a full class to "The Fall of the House of Usher," a second class to "Ligeia" with the poems "The Sleeper" and "Annabel Lee," and a third class to "Sonnet – To Science," "The Raven," and "The Philosophy of Composition." It's a cross section. Certainly not fully representative. But this gives students a taste and, I hope, offers various opportunities for discussion.

My students would be much happier – gleeful, I think – if I skipped the colonial and early national period and moved directly to the nineteenth century writers. No. That's not exactly true. Many of my students want Poe. Only Poe. All Poe. They can't wait to get to him. They embrace him as a contemporary. They like the offbeat horror and the gothic intensity. My students are often impatient as we work our way through the early colonial writings. The Puritans bore them, which seems odd to me because I find so much of a Puritan anxiety over individual damnation so prevalent in Poe's writing. Some students reach out to embrace Ann Bradstreet; I have found that students aiming at careers in nursing are sometimes drawn to Mary Rowlandson's symptoms of post-traumatic stress. But seventeenth and early eighteenth century notions of sin, and the impulse to lay prostrate before a justifiably angry God, seem to quash general student enthusiasm. Though students will not tend to Hawthorne's or Dickinson's or Melville's complex mix of profane and sacred, they do pay close attention to Poe's gothic. But why?

During the past year I had conversations with students who positively bubbled at the prospect of Poe; two young women were upset because I told the class that Poe was not my favorite author. They asked me not to let my own bias interfere with the class discussion and their enjoyment. That's how much they care. In an institution that suffers not a little from student timidity, these students were not only talking but asking forcefully that I acknowledge and honor their literary interests. I can't tell you how rare that is.

But let's get back to why they feel aligned with Poe.

A friend has told me about her experience reading "The Pit and the Pendulum" to her young (about ten years old) son. She told me that as she read his eyes grew saucer size. He pleaded with her to keep reading even though he was deeply frightened, even though he knew that she knew he was frightened. He loved the story. He loved what it did to him. For him, Poe's pit was a dark closet. It was no existential or eternally blazing maw tempting and endangering him and awaiting his soul. It was a place of fearful images, not soul consuming angst. At least, for him, not yet. He was too young, too inexperienced to translate the physical worry and anxiety into a metaphor acknowledging psychological pain and trauma. His pleasure was in just being scared.

My students know Poe from introductions to his stories in middle and secondary school. They have read his stories (and frankly a greater number of them than I have); they have also been told something of Poe's enigmatic and self-destructive life. Part of their interest is prurient. They love to get the dirt. Learning about Poe connects to their experience as consumers of salacious stories within our own celebrity culture. But that's too simple, too reductive. Besides, there is potentially a real disappointment once they realize that Poe's transgressions are thin gruel when placed against contemporary scandals, or especially daily talk/shock shows.

One of my students challenged me about my reticence in approaching Poe, "You're squeamish, huh?" No. Not really. Then again, yes. Sometimes. Especially when the narrative voice dives deep into obsession and echoes in a private hell surrounded by the dark tarn that robs the day of light and the night of peace and rest. It's not opium that heightens the nightmare. It's the emotional instability (or maybe even the hyper-stability) of a consciousness gone over the edge and never finding a moment of calm.

Students are attracted to Poe's dark side. But it is a darkness that more likely visits a Halloween haunted house than the blackness that shades many a human soul. My students embrace the horror that can be created in the brain; they have yet to find the terror of the heart. And it seems to have become my role to lead them into a

more profound darkness so that they begin to fathom what makes Poe truly frightening and, therefore, powerful. Their initial pleasure (like my friend's young son) is in the sheer physicality of horror (facing a sharp swinging blade, being buried alive, hearing the strong heart beat of the dead, sleeping next to [with?] the dead). But they don't grapple with how Poe manipulates their senses and their intellect and their emotions. As we work into the tales and into the poetry, careful students learn the value of pacing and the extended thread within narrative perspective. Experience with close reading demonstrates that Poe's first person narratives are not autobiographical. The narratives are more complicated and, therefore, more troubling than that. As students consider Poe's art, they begin (sometimes) to see the slough of despond into which many of Poe's characters have jumped. Gollum-like, Poe's narrators paddle around in the dark and focus on their own needs, needs that very often preclude any possibility for human relation. Obsession is, after all, not an outward turning of emotion to take in and respond to another's physical and emotional needs. It is an absorption with the self and an inability to see any other person, any other(s)' needs. It's being haunted by loss yet still ablaze in a frenzy of want and desire. It's an embrace of the perverse.

My students live in the spotlights of John Winthrop's shining city on a hill. The grey shadows have been washed out. My students, instead, bask in certitudes and bright primary colors of right and wrong. Grey has no place on their pallet. Most have little interest in gauging the success of a dissenter's new covenant with God because they are so assured that God stands at their side against a world of enemies and see dissent as a reason for prejudice and proscription. Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is near perfect in inspiring terror; however, Edwards' notorious flaming arrows and spiders leave them bored. Edwards' spiritual terror is different from physical horror. It's a difference that most (*most*) undergraduates have yet to learn. And that lesson has become even more difficult to discuss post-9/11 when physical threat has taken center stage and eclipsed any worry about existential crises. Even my college president talks to students about that day in September when "Elmira was attacked." You crave God's favor when you live under such assumptions of personal threat. And you are preoccupied with physical horror when the society in which you live focuses only on horrific images and shadowy threat and shies away from the deeper questions; for example, what price, if any, is to be paid for using self-righteousness to incite violence.

These days I am closer to understanding my students' ambivalence and the distinction they draw (though mostly unconsciously, which allows for easier compartmentalization) between physical and psychological horror and spiritual terror. The prospect of spiritual challenge dims when you are convinced you are on the side of the angels and blessed among men and women. If you already sit at the right hand of God, there is little need for spiritual reappraisal. You can not be affected by Edwards if you have not experienced the fear of the unredeemed. Given their reluctance to embrace a deep sense of sin, I find their infatuation with Poe heavily ironic. What else but spiritual horror is in Poe's heart. As he describes in "The Imp of the Perverse":

And this fall – this rushing annihilation – for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination – for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it. And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, *therefore* do we the more impetuously approach it. There is no passion in Nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. To indulge, for a moment, in any attempt at *thought*, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear, and *therefore* it is, I say, that we *cannot* . If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in a sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss, we plunge, and are destroyed. (1223)

This Poe is too intense for students. Poe's notion that we are all just inches and a brief mindful hesitation from jumping into the blackness is a good deal more troubling than Jonathan Edwards' vengeful God aiming to annihilate the sinner: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood" (318). Students seem to be much less troubled by images of physical stress and lunacy. Edwards' God becomes one more lunatic serial killer. Dismissing spiritual terror links this God to Poe's murders, entombments, and necromancy. And all the characters blend into a collection of images that suggest physical

danger and fright rather than spiritual pain and desiccation.

Poe's familiarity with and his ability to describe intellectual and emotional blackness make me squirm. Like Nabakov's Humbert Humbert and Roth's David Kapesch, Poe's narrators creep me out. The deadpan voice, the anxious look, the unflagging determination to hold on to a person, an image, or a supremely myopic ideal despite time's passing and changed relations push a character (and, by extension, a reader) to the brink of the imp's abyss. I don't think students fully appreciate the depths of despair presented in Poe's works. I don't think many of them can (which is, by the way, a good thing). As readers and teachers, we analyze and we extrapolate and we explain. But we do not so easily usher students into a spiritual darkness. In all, maybe that's a good thing because, in the end, I think that the uncertainties in life are the greater teacher of all things Poe: moments of instability masked as hyper-assurance, awareness of your own propensity for error and sin and then denying it. Without experience looking into that dark well, students will be satisfied with surface fright. Some of them, though, get it. More's the pity.

[1] The panel was part of the program at the International Edgar Allan Poe Conference in 2002. It was chaired by Dennis Eddings who is responsible for placing me in the lion's den.

[2] See Kiskis, Michael. "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Again!): Teaching for Social Justice or Sam Clemens' Children's Crusade." *The Mark Twain Annual*, no. 1 (2003): 63-77.

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