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Sandra Neuberger

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INTRODUCTION

In many of Poe's short stories one of the central themes is that of being buried alive. On the one hand, this is understandable, as Poe was a Gothic writer, and being buried alive was a central and very popular theme at that time¹. On the other hand, this was not the only popular theme and therefore it is interesting to find out why Poe was obsessed by it.

To reconstruct his probable reasons for employing this theme it is necessary to know and understand the times Poe lived in. Therefore this thesis starts with a chapter about the scientific developments of Poe's times, in medicine and health care, as well as psychology and psychiatry, and especially about the articles and reports about premature burials with which newspapers were filled. Those times were marked by medical experiments, and as a consequence many facts about the human body and about people buried alive became known to the general public. But this was only an early stage of medical science and there were many mistakes made, many wrong conclusions drawn and many different and confusing theories about diseases and the human body. This new knowledge influenced Poe a great deal and most of his stories, with the theme of being buried alive, start with a person who suffers from an illness which was being investigated in his times, such as, for example, catalepsy.

Poe's times were also influenced by discussions about apparent death and what signs indicated certain death. Many people died as a result of epidemics and they had to be buried immediately to avoid contagion. As a result it sometimes happened that people were wrongly believed to be dead but subsequently recovered. Many cases of premature burial appear to have happened at that time and were reported in medical journals, and people were very afraid that this might happen to them. This fear led to another branch of science; many physicians examined certain and uncertain signs of death and what could be done to avoid premature burials. As these events influenced not only the man in the street of that

¹ For an overview on Gothic literature read Andrew Smith's *Gothic literature*.

age but also writers and even Poe himself, it is important to know about them in order to be able to interpret the stories in terms of this theme. The events that took place and the different theories about the certain and uncertain signs, as well as the developments which resulted in the precautions, are explained in the first chapter.

Another branch of science that was beginning to be explored was psychology which can also be found in nearly every short story by Poe. Most of his characters suffer from a mental illness such as melancholy or panic attacks, and they are afraid of being buried alive. The clinical picture that is known nowadays and resembles closest the picture of being buried alive, is agoraphobia, which is dealt with in the chapter that follows. Poe himself also had various mental problems, which influenced not only his life but even his writings. In the final introductory chapter his problems and his life are explained in form of a short biography. All this theory is necessary to be able to understand why the theme of being buried alive is predominant in Poe's short stories.

The second part of this thesis is concerned with five short stories which are analysed in relation to this theoretical background. These five short stories are *Premature Burial*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *Berenice* and *The Cask of Amontillado*. Although there are a lot of different themes, symbols and references in Poe's short stories, apart from the theme of being buried alive, they are not the subject of this thesis. This work will concentrate only on the theme of premature interment and what is connected to it.

The first short story analysed with references to this background is *The Premature Burial*. It does directly mention 'real' cases of premature interment, which means it is mainly concerned with medical history of the 19th century, and what happened in Poe's times in terms of science. The second story, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, is well known for its references and relations of each element to other elements within the story. Here each person and event is important and related to the others. It is full of symbols and psychological aspects which all point towards death. *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the third story, can be interpreted as a

symbolic story about a case of apparent death and the resulting premature burial; it does not describe an actual case, but can be interpreted as such. It concentrates on the fears and beliefs of people in the 19th century. The fourth story, *Berenice*, is a very personal story. Poe here creates a situation and characters that strongly resemble his own circumstances as well as those of his family. The fifth story, *The Cask of Amontillado*, is one of Poe's later stories. It is unusual as it describes only a short period of time and a case of premature burial that is deliberate. As in the previous story, it can be related to Poe's own psychological problems and his family situation.

1. Scientific Developments during the 19th century

1.1. Facts about Premature Interment

During the 19th century there was much discussion about whether premature interment did actually happen and, if so, how often. The main argument of the people who spread this panic was that the number of those people who had wrongly been believed dead but were saved through circumstances, meant that there were many further victims of terrible mistakes who died in their graves. Opinions about the exact number ranged from one out of 2,000 to a third of all the people who died at home and had therefore not been examined by a doctor. The American lawyer Dana stated in 1897 that one American per week was buried alive (Dana, quoted in Bondeson p. 282).

In 1896 the cemetery of Fort Randall in Rochester, New York, was closed legally. T.M. Montgomery examined the corpses and claimed that 200 of them showed signs of premature interment, which meant that about 2 per cent had been buried alive. These signs were widespread; the arms of a soldier who had been struck by lightning, an incident which was already known for not necessarily causing death, an alcoholic who was clutching his whiskey bottle and many contorted faces. Tebb and Vollum confirmed this high number (Tebb and Vollum, p. 81).

However, a critical examination of those cases shows that their numbers are much too high. These doctors copied many case studies from different newspapers all around the world and wrote them down before those reports reached the United States. During the 19th century there were many ruthless reporters who deliberately concocted different stories in order to create a sensation. Scientists at that time agreed that oxygen in a coffin would be exhausted by a living person within twenty minutes (Hasselt, p. 65).

Propagandists against premature interment, as soon as a corpse was lying on its side or showed a face contorted by grimaces, claimed that the person had been buried alive. In most cases this can be disproved and

explained by contraction of the muscles or by gases from decomposition. Some other cases can be ascribed to tomb raiders. On the other hand there were corpses found that held their own pulled-out hair in their hands or had gnawed fingers. Most often these cases could be ascribed to rats or decomposition gases but there were also other cases.

1.1.1. Case Studies

The following case was investigated and described at the start of the 19th century by the Swedish doctor Per Hedenius. Some students went for a walk over a frozen lake. On their way back there was suddenly a very strong storm and the surface of the ice broke. All but one of the students were saved; that one student was later found dead on a large piece of ice. What was so strange about this case was that all the fingers of his left hand were missing. In the beginning the doctor thought that birds of prey might have been responsible but when he examined the body he found bits of the fingers in the stomach of the body (Hedenius, quoted in Bondeson, pp. 287-288). In this case there was no suggestion of premature burial, but it shows that people in danger, when in mortal fear, are able to eat their fingers. So, although most of the cases of corpses with gnawed fingers can be ascribed to rats, not all can.

The next case was reported in the *Sunday Times* on 30 December 1838. A man from Tonneins was declared dead and needed to be buried. When the gravedigger started to throw the first shovels of earth onto the coffin, the mourners heard an unidentifiable sound from inside the coffin. They were very frightened and looked for someone to open the coffin. When the coffin was opened they were even more frightened because they expected something really terrifying but they could find no proof of life in the dead person (Tebb and Vollum, pp. 84-87). Cases like that one were observed frequently; the noises can be explained through gases of decomposition that leave through the mouth and create a sound that can be very loud (Vogl, p. 53).

Further 'proof' of people being buried alive were stories such as the following. The German physician Michael Benedikt Lessing reported in

1837 the case of a young Swedish girl, the daughter of a very rich man, who had died while pregnant in the last month (Brenden, quoted in Bondeson, pp. 12-13). During the evening a clerk heard disturbing sounds from the grave. When he came closer he thought he heard words like "Gott! Jesus! Gnade!"². He was a very superstitious man and therefore did not open the grave. He ran home and hid in his bed. The next day he told the story to the priest and the grave was opened. When they opened the coffin they found that the girl had given birth.

The phenomenon of a woman giving birth when already buried has been described from time to time. In most cases it could be proved that gases of decomposition within the corpse were responsible. These gases can lead to high pressure within the belly, which is enough to press the baby out of the womb (Bondeson, p. 291)

The next case was reported by the Austrian doctor C. Pfendler (Pfendler, quoted in Bondeson, pp. 294-295). In 1820 he observed a fifteen year-old girl who suffered from epileptic fits. One evening the girl collapsed and could not be reanimated although she was treated with smelling salts, cut with blades and connected to a Galvanic battery; the girl did not show any reaction. They consulted Johann Peter Frank who knew the papers by Hufeland on apparent death and suggested she be kept in a warm bed until signs of decay could be found. After twenty eight hours her relatives thought that they could detect a smell of decay so they prepared to bury her. Dr. Pfendler insisted on examining her one last time to make sure she showed signs of decay, but he could find none; he thought he had seen her breathing. He put itching powder on her body and the girl suddenly opened her eyes. With a smile on her face she stated that she was too young to die. She recovered completely and told her doctor that although she was not able to speak or move, she had heard and understood everything that had been said. Dr Pfendler did not believe what she said but when she repeated some Latin words he had used he was convinced. During the 19th century there were many similar cases which were referred to as 'apparent death'.

² Translation: "God! Jesus! Grace!"

Discussion about the danger of being buried alive reached its peak in the middle of the 19th century. Stories about apparent death and premature burials filled not only medical journals but also newspapers. Many cases like the ones described above were reported, which led to fear within the public, and people shuddered. Poe was certainly also confronted with this topic from time to time and it inspired him to relate his stories to the fears and obsessions of his time.

1.2. Apparent Death

Apparent death is an important aspect of being buried alive. In Poe's time medicine was not as developed as it is nowadays and so it was sometimes hard for physicians and doctors to be certain whether a person was alive or dead. Sometimes a person was not dead but did not show any of the accepted and recognisable signs of death for the medical men of that time; nowadays we know that a person might only be apparently dead. This lack of knowledge sometimes led to people being buried while still alive.

1.2.1. Theory and methodology for the diagnosis of death

According to Thürnau (Thürnau, p. 11) apparent death is a transition from life to death; death is an irreversible breakdown of the human organism and apparent death is not the same as a shock, it means that reflexes, respiration and heartbeat are reduced so significantly that they can easily be overlooked. Therefore life has to be defined according to the functions of the brain. The diagnosis of death and moment of death should only depend on the death of the brain.

Apparent death describes a condition of unconsciousness that goes far beyond the casual faint; it can often be observed when people drown, freeze, are strangled, are hanged, asphyxiate, are struck by lightning or suffer a great loss of blood. In addition it can also be found in newborn babies.

1.2.2. Indications of death and their examination

Over many centuries cardiac arrest and apnoea were considered to be the absolutely certain signs of death. As apparent death became a main topic physicians soon made a distinction between certain and uncertain signs of death. Certain signs were decay, rigor mortis, death stains, permanent dehydration and cooling. Concerning uncertain signs of death many authors and physicians had different theories.

In olden times the absence of the heartbeat was the commonly accepted sign of death³; breathing and activity of the brain were thought to be dependent on the heartbeat. Even then experts knew that these criteria were unreliable. Hippocrates, Plutarch, Plinius, Pluto, Galen and many more reported on people who had been believed dead and had then been brought back to life (Bruhier, p. 59). As a result the Romans severed the little finger of apparently dead people to make sure there was no evidence of life. People were worried that this might happen to them and they became frightened of having their little finger cut off. Laws were passed according to which a certain time had to pass between death and burial (Frank, p. 7). Until the 16th century sudden death was seen as punishment by God and nobody wondered why it happened. Only after the 16th century did medical thinking disengage itself from this religious agenda. People tried to explain these cases in pathologic-anatomic and natural scientific ways; for example Paracelsus (1493-1541), Cardonus (1501-1576), Harvey, Boyle, von Haller and many others.

Countless and often very contradictory treatises were published about apparent death (Frank, p. 9). Plinius wrote in his *Naturalis historia* that there were countless indicators but they were not always infallible. The famous doctor Galen suggested that with symptoms such as hysteria, asphyxia, coma and catalepsies people should be very careful, as these evidences of life could be deactivated for many weeks and these people were not dead; the same was true for people who died from alcohol or poisoning.

³ For an overview of death and burial in classical antiquity see: J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, and I. Morris, *Death, Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity*, or the essays by L.G. Stevenson in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 49 (1975).

During the Middle Ages, principal parts of medical knowledge from history fell into oblivion (Boase, p. 29); there are very few sources from this epoch referring to signs of death and the fear of apparent death. When a 'dead' person was brought back to life, people thought it had to be magic or witchcraft. When somebody died, which meant the person was without breath or pulse, he or she did not have any chance of revival; nobody tried to reanimate the person (Struve, p. 34). One of the few known tests to see if someone was dead was to hold a candle in front of the 'dead' person's mouth. If the person was still alive, the flame would flicker. Another method was to wait a certain time before burying the corpse (Finucane, pp. 40-60).

The poorer part of the population believed that touching a dead body would mean that you would be impurified and dishonoured (Frank, p. 31). An attempted recovery of a life was also very problematic because it was seen as an intrusion contra to criminal jurisdiction and one would be punished for it. During the 17th century medicine became a subculture of pagan myths, religious legends and superstition. A person was either dead or alive; dying as a process was totally alien to people of that era. It was a supernatural phenomenon if a corpse was reanimated, people did not suspect that the body might still have been alive at the time of burial (Garmann, p. 67). The probe for signs of life was unchanged, people looked for pulse, breath and heartbeat; most of the time this was done by laymen because there were few doctors and very few people could afford one. Physicians knew about the dangers of premature burial. They suggested that especially women be kept above the ground for three days as they tended towards hysteria which could lead to apparent death. New probes for life that were used were smelling salts, sneezing powder and mirrors in front of the mouth.

The first written document in England which shows that signs of death and fear of being buried alive were a matter of concern, is Sir Francis Bacon's *Historia vitae et mortis*. This work contains a collection of materials that have been subjected to the scientific method of induction. It consists of a series of essays devoted to all aspects of the maintenance and prolongation of life, including medicines and herbs, food and drink,

sleep and exercise, temperature and climate, occupations, baths and hygiene. In his book, Bacon recommended life in caves and on mountains and suggests that frequent bloodletting may help to renew the body fluids. In 17th century France it was the fashion for people who were afraid of being buried alive to include a paragraph in their last will to protect themselves against it: they wanted their soles scratched with a razor blade or their breast opened to make sure their heart had stopped beating. Physicians knew that mistakes could easily be made, if people were declared dead especially during times of cholera and pestilence. People tried to avoid contact with those illnesses by burying the dead as soon as possible. These burials did not allow every body that was thrown into a mass grave to be examined closely (Diemerbroeck, p. 13). During times of epidemic physicians often left ill people in the care of the pallbearer (Lancisi, p. 54). Physicians therefore suggested that relatives or friends should themselves stick needles under a toenail of the body to check if it was really dead.

The situation changed in 1767 when the life-saving societies were founded. In Paris anyone who reanimated a 'dead' drunk received a small reward. Even more successful was the life-saving medal. In both cases it meant that if one saved a person one was rewarded. Often people tried to capitalise on this system; for example some friends who needed money chose a 'victim' and a 'rescuer' and the rest acted as attestors. When the reward was paid they shared it between them.

Johann Albrecht Reimarus was the first to list all the medical remedies that were used during these times. In 1770 Dr. Philip Gabriel Hensler in Copenhagen identified all the methods and supplies that were known and used. In Germany it could even happen that a person was physically punished for a deviation from the mandatory provisions. In 1771 the *New York Gazette* and the *Weekly Mercury* published an article about first-aid sanctions in Europe but it was not before 1785 that the *Rules for Restoring Suspended Animation from Drowning etc.* were released. In 1774 the Royal Humane Society was the most meaningful of the 'Life-saving Societies'; it was founded in England and later extended to the United States (compare: homepage of the Royal Humane Society). The Society

was founded in London in 1774 by two doctors, William Hawes (1736-1808) and Thomas Cogan (1736-1818). They were concerned about the number of people taken for dead in error and in some cases buried alive. Both men wanted to promote the new but controversial medical technique of resuscitation and offered money to anyone who rescued someone from the verge of death.

In 1794 a number of different projects for the organized supply of wounded persons, common hygiene, public welfare and the relief of misery were planned. Ways of reanimation were the supply of warmth, insufflations of air, aggravation of the body and operations of deflation. Warming was done with towels, hay and straw, insufflations meant exposing the respiratory passages through the supply of air; for this, double bellows were used. In 1714 Schroeck suggested trying a tracheotomy, and even mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was an accepted method (Frank, p. 18). Electrification and appliance of galvanism were highly in fashion (Creve, p. 12).

There were also many different views about what the signs of certain death were and those which were not certain. According to Puppe (Puppe, p. 927) for example, signs of death were atony of the muscles especially in the face, fading of the turgor in all tissues, loss of pressure in the eye, paleness and analgesia of the skin and mucous membrane, the loss of reflexes and fixed pupils.

1.2.3. Fear of appearing to be dead

Bruhier wrote of many examples of apparent death. His definition of death as a treatable, not always irreversible, condition created the preconditions for the development of so-called 'Life-saving Societies' mentioned above, which devoted themselves to the rescue of the apparently dead.

In the 60s of the 18th century physicians understood that death after a chronic illness was a totally different process from sudden death through drowning, asphyxia, heart attacks, strokes, accidents, etc. In the case of

sudden death the bodies could be reanimated. Johann Peter Frank⁴ reformed Public Health Care with his *System einer vollständigen medicinischen Polizey*.

1.2.4. Effects and Consequences

1.2.4.1. Morgues

In 1787 the physician Francois Thiéry, who was convinced that people died only a certain time after the occurrence of the usual signs of death, suggested, as did Bruhier, that corpses should be kept in a morgue to protect them. One year later his work had already been translated into German. In the same year Frank published the fourth edition of his influential work on social and forensic medicine (Haubold, p. 122). Just like Bruhier, he was also convinced that decay was the only certain sign of death but he was against domestic laying-out; he suggested morgues should be established. His ideas became very popular.

The physician Hufeland was also a follower of Bruhier; he published many medical books and articles. According to Hufeland there are three intermediary states between apparent death and death itself: The first state is characterized by asphyxia and apnoea: this state occurs when there is apparent apnoea and no more pulse; reanimation is still possible in this case. The second state is very similar to the first but in addition a main organ is so badly damaged that it can not regain its full operational ability. Reanimation is improbable but still has to be tried. The third state is characterized by putrefaction and decay. Here the patient is certainly dead and reanimation is not possible.

Hufeland supported the principle of building morgues in which the deceased would be laid out for a certain time before being buried. He raised funds from the rich and personally supervised the planning and building of the first morgue, the so-called *Vitae Dubiae Asylum* in Weimar. He insisted that the rooms were heated and lighted and that a caretaker

⁴ Johann Peter Frank, 1745-1821, was a follower of Bruhier

was present all the time (Hufeland, p. 51). The second morgue followed very soon; in 1795 in Berlin the new one was equipped with a system of strings which were fixed to the fingers and connected to bells (Stein, p. 26). Many more morgues followed; in the beginning they were merely functional, but soon they became more and more ostentatious and were elevated to the same level as churches and mausoleums. But because of the extreme smelliness they were soon seen as a blemish and until the middle of the 19th century many of them were demolished or used for a different purpose. Only the ones in larger cities were kept in use and more were built. In the 80s and 90s of the 19th century they had finally been established and became widely accepted. The first American morgue was built in the 1820s in New York.

Kraus suggested that all corpses should be opened as a matter of routine; this could also be useful for establishing the cause of death. The rich soon insisted on this procedure and any physician was allowed to perform an autopsy (Kraus, pp. 51-57).

1.2.4.2. Security coffins

As morgues were very expensive and therefore soon disliked, people started to think of other ways of avoiding being buried alive (Bondeson, pp.136-139). In collaboration with Duke Ferdinand von Braunschweig the first 'security coffin' was created in 1790. What distinguished it from an ordinary coffin was that it had a window through which air and light could come and so would save the apparently dead. Furthermore it had a closing mechanism which means it was not nailed down and the person who was inside the coffin had a key placed in the burial gown, so should that person wake there would be no problem about opening the coffin and the door of the crypt.

This coffin was very expensive, so the average person could not afford it and besides it would have been much more complicated to construct such a coffin for an ordinary grave and not just for a crypt. An alternative construction was built by the priest P.G. Pessler: here a pipe with a rope was put into the coffin and a rope connected to the church bells. So if a

corpse woke up, it would just have to ring the bells and would be saved. But the priest did not allow for the weight of the bell nor for the weakness of the body.

Pastor Beck therefore suggested bells be installed inside the pipe because they would not be so heavy as they were smaller and the person inside the coffin would not need so much strength to ring them. Another suggestion was a voice cone such as those on large ships so that the occupant would be able to make himself heard if he or she was still alive. The cone could also be used to investigate the smell of the body; if after a few days the person still did not smell it would indicate that he or she was still alive.

Hypelli proposed to position a so-called 'Rettungswecker', a construction above the head of the body, because Hypelli thought that the first thing a body which woke would try to do was to stand up and then the person would push with the head against the construction and trigger the alarm (Hypelli, pp. 44-46). This example did not have a hole for air because some people were convinced that apparently dead would not need fresh air, they would get by without it.

The first security coffin that was really practical was created by the physician Adolf Gutmuth. The coffin was connected to the surface by a pipe and if the person in the coffin rang the bells inside the pipe, he or she could be provided with food and light through the pipe until released. Gutmuth even tested his coffin himself; first just for a few minutes then he was interred and tested it for a few hours, and another time even for more than a day. In 1827 Dr von Hesse introduced his improved version of the coffin. It had two pipes, one at the head and one at the feet, and it too was equipped with bells and a voice cone (Schmid, quoted in Bondeson, p. 140).

The physician Johann Georg Taberger criticised all these methods. He thought that a weak and ill individual who had just regained consciousness, had neither the physical power to pull the strings or ropes nor the presence of mind to open the pipes. In his coffin the hands and feet of the body were connected with strings to bells which were enclosed

in a building so that neither wind nor birds could trigger a false alarm. Furthermore there was a net inside the pipe which kept insects out of the coffin, and a dewatering system made sure the rainwater was drawn off so the person would not lie in the cold water or even drown (Schmid, quoted in Bondeson, p. 141).

In the 1920s people tried to combine the idea of a morgue with the idea of a security coffin. The result was a sort of death chamber, a portable morgue for one person. The advantages were that it was not so expensive, the person did not have to lie in one room with many other corpses, and it kept the smell away. A string tied to the hand was connected to a bell on the roof and the corpse stayed inside for a few days. If it did not show any signs of decay it would stay longer or would be disinterred, while if it showed no signs at all it would be buried.

Altogether more than thirty different examples were patented, in the United States there were twenty-two between 1868 and 1925. Some of those in the United States had already been patented in Europe but the inventors hoped for greater demands if they also patented them in the United States.

The security precautions introduced by Bruhier and his followers probably reduced the number of people who in the 19th century were buried prematurely because of apparent death. Another component responsible for the reduction of this number was that the supposed dead were now examined by a doctor. But even at the end of the 19th century cases of premature burial were reported, mainly during cholera epidemics. Physicians were overstrained by the high number of bodies that had to be examined. In addition patients who are in the so-called 'cold stadium' of cholera are sometimes in a very similar state to a deceased which does not mean that they cannot recover.

1.3. Galvanism and Medicine

The majority of the population had also realized that sometimes there was a chance to reanimate a body and that apparent death was not always irreversible. This circumstance allowed some scientists to become

very popular among the people although other scientists had already proved their theories to be wrong; people clung to everything which gave them hope of being rescued or saved from premature burial. They knew from the newspaper reports of their time and had heard many horror stories about premature burials. When there was an invention that could prevent awakening in a tomb they wanted to believe in it; the Galvanic battery was one of these hope-bearers.

The rise of experimental physiology in the 1740s went hand-in-hand with the appearance of the theory of subtle fluids in experimental physics (Hankins, pp. 119-121). Physiology turned from the description of the body's organs to an investigation of their characteristics such as growth, nutrition and regeneration, which distinguish living things from machines. The new science of experimental physics had a direct influence on physiology and medicine as electricity promised to hold answers to various problems. The electric eel and the sensitive plant were studied because they both seemed to protect themselves electrically. 'Electricians in England, France and Germany concluded from their experiments that electrified seeds germinated faster, that electrified plants sent out shoots earlier, and that electrified animals were slightly lighter than non-electrified ones' (Hankins, p. 120). As electricity produced muscle contraction scientists concluded that electricity in the body took the form of a fluid that moved through the nerves carrying sense stimuli and motor commands.

Doctors were soon using electrical therapy with apparent success. Luigi Galvani⁵ believed that frogs' legs contained organic jars that caused the legs to kick when they discharged. The galvanic battery where two cells or more are connected electrically to produce energy was named after him. The complexity of electrical phenomena certainly put eighteenth century scientists beyond their understanding, but they had already tried to apply the results of physical experiments in the world of living things and failed.

Europe's intellectuals praised Galvani's work as a great achievement. They were very excited at his theory about the relationship of electricity to

⁵ Luigi Galvani was born on 9 September 1737 in Bologna, Italy and died on 4 December 1798. He was an Italian physician and anatomist. As a result of the success of his experiments Volta continued to explore electricity. For more information on his experiments and theories read Züllig, *Luigi Galvani (1732-1789), Entdecker der Bioelectrizität*.

life. And while Alessandro Volta, Galvani's contemporary and a physics professor at the University of Pavia, believed that Galvani's work was of great importance, his own experimentation led him to a different interpretation of Galvani's experiments. For Volta, the electrical phenomenon that Galvani observed arose from the action of dissimilar metals not an internal property of life. In the end, Volta's view prevailed and opened the science and technology of electrolytic action and batteries. Out of his great respect for Galvani, Volta coined the term 'Galvanic action.'

Giovanni Aldini was the nephew of biological electricity guru Luigi Galvani, and he wanted to electrify a body (Parent, pp. 576-584). His scientific work was chiefly concerned with galvanism and its medical application and with experiments for preserving human life and material objects from destruction by fire. His stated reason for delving into what was known as galvanic reanimation was to aid the recently drowned, who he said, might be resuscitated. Aldini leaned on some earlier experience with beheaded victims in Bologna, as well as animal experiments, to convince British government agents of the viability of the plan. Aldini's experiments were a very public roadshow demonstration of Galvani's ideas. He travelled all over Europe publicly electrifying human and animal bodies, and his performances were extraordinary theatrical spectacles. In 1802 Giovanni Aldini came to London with a spectacular demonstration. Such demonstrations performed on humans (and oxen heads) produced repeated, spasmodic movements of facial muscles, arms and legs. He stimulated the heads and trunks of cows, horses, sheep and dogs.

London's Royal College of Surgeons was at that time fascinated by the boundaries between life and death and Aldini was more than happy to offer his services. The 1751 Murder Act⁶ would not allow hanged criminals

⁶ The Murder Act 1751 was an Act of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Great Britain. It included the provision 'for better preventing the horrid crime of murder that some further terror and peculiar mark of infamy be added to the punishment', and that 'in no case whatsoever shall the body of any murderer be suffered to be buried', by mandating either public dissection or the 'hanging in chains' of the cadaver. The Act also stipulated that a person found guilty of murder should be executed within 2 days of being found guilty unless the execution would happen on a Friday in which case the execution should take place on the Saturday. (Banner, p. 77)

to be buried and their corpses were often used for scientific experiments and discovery. The most famous experiment took place at the Royal College of Surgeons in London in 1803, on a hanged man named George Forster. His body was 'delivered to be anatomized' (Newgate Calendar, quoted by Parent, p. 581), but no one could have imagined quite the violation that Aldini was going to inflict on him. Before a large medical and general audience, he took a pair of conducting rods linked to a powerful battery, and touched the rods to various parts of the body in turn. The results were dramatic. According to newspaper reports of the time, some of the spectators genuinely believed that the body was about to come to life, and were suitably awestruck even though it did not happen. Within the decade, Scottish experimenters were performing similar feats, and the College of Surgeons had, after further attempts similar to Aldini's, revived the heart of another convicted murderer, John Bellingham. It was the first recorded heart shock revival in medical history.

Although Volta's ideas had supplanted Galvani's theory of animal electricity within the scientific community, the notion of electricity and reanimation still lingered when Edgar Allan Poe was writing his stories. Among the population there were still philosophical discussions about Luigi Galvani's experiments and how galvanism suggested the possibility of reanimating the dead. These discussions stimulated Poe to explore this subject in his stories, as he knew that his readers were really interested in this phenomenon and also believed in it. In many novels and short stories of the 19th century there is the allusion to lightning and galvanism as the basis for resurrecting a lifeless cadaver. Poe's narrators often give galvanism or the Galvanic battery as the reason for an awakening from apparent death.

1.4. History of Psychology and Psychiatry

A topic that often goes hand in hand with premature interment in Poe's short stories is mental illness. It is sometimes described when one of the characters suffers from a mental illness and is afraid of being buried alive,

or another character is mentally ill and therefore does not realize that another person is buried alive. In any case, whenever the topic of premature interment occurs there can also be found a relation to mental illness.

Until the middle of the 19th century psychology was widely regarded as a branch of philosophy. At the beginning of the 19th century not much was known about mental illnesses, about their origins, the consequences and especially about how to cure them. But during the same century a lot had been done for the development and improvement of this science. The early 19th century also saw the development of psychiatry as a recognized field. Mental health institutions came to utilize more elaborate and, in the course of time, more humane treatment methods. The 19th century saw a huge increase in the number of patients. On the one hand, Poe was very interested in science in general, and as psychology and psychiatry were new and popular sciences at that time he was also interested in these branches. On the other hand, Poe himself was known for having had many psychological problems himself which might also have been the reason for his interest therein.

Although Aldini was mainly known for his road shows, he was among the first to treat mentally ill patients with shocks to the brain, reporting complete electrical cures for a number of mental illnesses. These experiments were described in detail in Aldini's book published in London in 1803: *An account of the late improvements in galvanism, with a series of curious and interesting experiments performed before the commissioners of the French National Institute, and repeated lately in the anatomical theatres of London*. It was an influential book on galvanism and psychiatry which presented for the first time a series of experiments in which the principles of Volta and Galvani were used together.

Another most influential man in early 19th century America was Benjamin Rush who lived from 1745 to 1813 (Matthews, p. 51). He studied at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and received his Bachelor's degree from that institution in 1760. After that he returned to Philadelphia and studied medicine under Dr. John Redman from 1761 until

1766. Then he left for Scotland to finish his studies at the University of Edinburgh. When he received his degree in June 1768, Rush travelled to London to continue his training at St. Thomas' Hospital. He was a pioneer in the study of insanity and abnormal mental states; therefore he has been called the 'Father of American Psychiatry'.

Rush insisted that every physician should have an acquaintance with psychology. Because he believed in a few basic principles he reduced all illnesses to one basic disorder, namely fever, which he wanted to cure with bleeding and purging. He was strongly convinced that mind and body act and react with one another; this made him one of the first Americans who thought of madness essentially to be a physical disease. In his *Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812) he stated that he had tried to bring mental disorders 'down to the level of all other diseases of the human body, and to show that the mind and body are moved by the same causes and subject to the same laws.' To him viewing human beings totally as natural organisms, meant, in every aspect, including also mind and the moral faculty. Another important view of Rush was that crime should be seen less as a sin than as a sign of sickness. This position led him to oppose capital punishment. These new findings might have been known to Poe and could be the reason why very often, if a character suffers from an unidentified illness and is buried alive, there is mental illness involved.

What preoccupied Rush was the dependence of both mind and body on the physical and social environment. He ran an asylum for mentally ill patients in Philadelphia where he prescribed carefully controlled diet and exercise; this he combined with music and occupational therapy. Rush believed that there were many aspects of American culture that were conducive to insanity; and he was convinced that this had increased since 1790.

In the 1820s European scientists were beginning to perform sophisticated physical experiments on the brain. Until then philosophers kept stating that psychology was no science as the activities and the contents of the mind could not be measured. Objectivity such as was

necessary in physics and chemistry could never be reached and therefore it remained subjective (Boeree, p. 5). This was changed in the early 19th century by Ernst Weber. He formulated laws relating a physical stimulus to a mental experience.

In the United States in 1834, Anna Marsh, a physician's widow, used her heritage for building the country's first financially stable private asylum. It was followed by speciality institutions of every treatment philosophy. The new and dominating ideas that mental illness could be 'conquered' during the mid-nineteenth century were extremely influential. An ever-increasing patient population overstrained psychiatrists and asylums. The average number of patients in asylums in the United States jumped at a rate of 927% (Shorter, p 47). Increases in asylum populations may have been a result of the transfer of care from families and poorhouses but the specific reasons as to why the increase occurred is still debated today.

This popularity of the branches of psychology and psychiatry, apart from Poe's own mental problems, may have been one reason why he so frequently included this theme in his stories. It was a topic of public interest and omnipresent at that time.

2. AGORAPHOBIA AND PANIC DISORDER

As the following short account of Edgar Allan Poe's life will show, Poe had many serious problems and psychological difficulties which influenced him a great deal, especially in his writing. In many of his stories mental illness is one of the main themes; there is very often a protagonist who suffers from psychological problems.

In Poe's time psychological science and psychological therapy had not been developed very far; psycho-therapy was not well known or advanced or popular. Therefore it is rather difficult to describe what exact mental problems Poe experienced. He had never been through psycho-therapy or talked to a psychologist. He can only be analysed from what we know from his letters and from what other writers wrote about him.

His stories cannot serve as a source for an analysis of his mental condition as they are not autobiographical; they can only give hints about what his problems might have been. He may have included some of his own feelings in the stories, or been a good observer and described mental problems he observed in others.

Whatever the explanation for the repeatedly occurring theme of mental illness, it is conspicuous that the mental illness theme is often combined with a case of premature burial which can be understood as a hint on his psychological problems. Even with today's expertise it is not easy to identify his mental problems, but the fear of being buried alive is one of them.

One of the main features of agoraphobia is a panic attack or a panic disorder, which is indirectly also sometimes described in Poe's stories and can even be related to his biography and premature burial. Therefore these two psychological phenomena were chosen in order to analyse some of his stories according to mental problems. They are certainly not the only mental illnesses that are taken into consideration when writing about Poe's psychological condition but they are the ones which best

describe the psychological phenomenon of being afraid of being buried alive.

2.1. Clinical Picture of Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder

2.1.1. Panic Attacks

According to Antony and Swinson the main features of a panic disorder are unexpected panic attacks and the tendency to be overly concerned about having them (Antony and Swinson, p. 21). A panic attack is a rush of fear or a discomfort that reaches its peak in less than ten minutes. It includes at least four of these symptoms: racing or pounding heart, sweating, shaking or trembling, shortness of breath, choking feelings, chest discomfort, nausea or abdominal discomfort, feeling dizzy, faint or lightheaded, a feeling of unreality or depersonalization, fear of 'going crazy' or losing control, a fear of dying, numbness or tingling sensations, chills or hot flushes (American Psychological Association).

Panic attacks occur across a range of different psychological disorders, including anxiety disorders, eating disorders and depression. In addition, panic attacks often occur in the absence of any specific psychological illness, for example before some stressful event such as a difficult exam or getting married.

There are three different types of panic attack (Antony and Swinson, pp. 21-25): the unexpected or uncued attack, the situational-bound attack and the situational- predisposed attack. The unexpected panic attack occurs out of the blue, without any warning or obvious external trigger. It is the one which is most often associated with panic disorder. The situational-bound panic attack invariably occurs in a particular situation, and the situational-predisposed is in between the other two – it occurs in certain situations but not necessarily each time the situation is encountered. Agoraphobics often report situational-predisposed attacks that occur in certain situations, for example crowds, rather than in others, for example at home.

2.1.2. Panic Disorder

According to the American Psychological Association, to meet the criteria for Panic Disorder a person must have a history of multiple panic attacks occurring unexpectedly or without any obvious trigger. In addition the person has to have experienced a period, defined as a month or more, during which at least one of the following criteria are met:

- the person is concerned about having more panic attacks
- the person is concerned about the consequences of a panic attack, for example that the panic attack may lead to a heart attack or stroke, a loss of control or loss of consciousness
- a significant change in behaviour that is related to panic attacks can be observed; for example the person avoids certain places or activities, insists on being accompanied or insists on carrying some safe object

An additional requirement for the diagnosis of Panic Disorder is the provision that the symptoms are not the direct effect of the abuse of substances such as alcohol, cocaine or caffeine, or of a general medical condition.

2.2. Agoraphobia

Panic attacks are the main feature of agoraphobia. When people suffering from agoraphobia get into a situation which they find threatening, they might have a panic attack. But undergoing panic attacks does not necessarily mean that someone is developing agoraphobia.

2.2.1. Definition and Terminology

The word 'agoraphobia' is derived from the Greek words agora (αγορά) and phobos (φόβος), and translates literally to 'a fear of the market place' (Agoraphobia Resource Center). Agoraphobia is a form of anxiety disorder related to fear. A phobia is generally defined as an unrelenting fear of a situation, activity or thing that causes one to want to avoid it. The definition

of agoraphobia is a fear of being in a situation from which one either cannot escape or from which escaping would be difficult or humiliating; agoraphobia is the fear of being in a situation where one might experience anxiety or panic. The sufferer becomes anxious in environments that are unfamiliar or where he or she perceives that they have little control.

This definition shows how premature burial is related to agoraphobia. Being buried alive means that a person is either in a tomb or a vault from which escape is difficult or even impossible. As people know that they have no control over the situation once they are believed dead, they take precautions.

Because of their fears, people avoid places where they think they may have a panic attack or panic-like symptoms. People with agoraphobia may feel anxious about such things as a loss of bladder or bowel control or choking on food in the presence of others. Commonly feared places and situations are lifts, sporting events, bridges, public transport, driving, shopping malls and airplanes. They also might feel anxious about being alone at home, leaving home or being in a crowded place where it might be difficult or embarrassing to find a way out. This anxiety is often compounded by a fear of social embarrassment, as the agoraphobic fears the onset of a panic attack and appearing distraught in public (Hamm, p 34).

Agoraphobics may experience panic attacks in situations where they feel trapped, insecure, out of control or too far from their personal comfort zone. The fears can be so overwhelming that some people are essentially trapped in their own homes — it's the only place they feel truly safe so they don't venture out into the public at all. To avoid the anxiety associated with these situations they refrain from putting themselves into such situations. The severity of agoraphobia is quite variable. Some people with agoraphobia live essentially normal lives as they avoid potentially anxiety-provoking situations. However, in severe cases of agoraphobia, people are bound to the home. Many people with agoraphobia are comfortable seeing visitors in a defined space which they feel they can control. Such people may live for years without leaving their homes, while happily seeing

visitors in and working from their personal safety zones. If the agoraphobic leaves his or her safety zone, they may experience a panic attack. These people work very hard to avoid any and all situations that might cause them to become anxious. People with agoraphobia also avoid activities that might trigger a panic attack, for example drinking coffee, becoming sexually aroused, taking certain medication, exercising, getting angry, and being in hot and stuffy rooms.

Agoraphobia treatment can be challenging because it usually means the subject confronting their own fears. Both medication and psychotherapy have been found to be helpful. With treatment, one can escape the trap of agoraphobia and live a more enjoyable life.

2.2.2. Risk factors

Agoraphobia usually starts during late adolescence or early adulthood, but younger children and older adults also can develop it. The most common age for agoraphobia to begin is when a person is in his or her mid- to late-20s. Although researchers do not know exactly what causes agoraphobia, they do know several risk factors involved, or the things that make some people more vulnerable to agoraphobia (Agoraphobia Research Center). Girls and women, middle-aged individuals, low-income populations, and individuals who are either widowed, separated or divorced are at increased risk of developing agoraphobia. These risk factors may also include: having panic disorder, having a tendency to be nervous or anxious, alcohol and substance abuse disorders. Frequently, people report that the onset of their agoraphobia followed a stressful or traumatic event in their lives.

Today it cannot be said for certain that Poe suffered from agoraphobia but some risk factors can be found in his biography. It is known that Poe was drinking excessively and also took other drugs which can cause agoraphobia. Another risk factor is a stressful or traumatic event in someone's life. Poe experienced many stressful events: his parents died when he was still very young and through the rest of his life because of

their diseases he lost many other people he loved. These traumatic experiences can lead to psychological problems and even to agoraphobia.

2.2.3. Causes and Contributing Factors

There are a number of theories about what can cause agoraphobia. As with most mental illnesses, agoraphobia is probably caused by a complex mix of biology and genetics, one's life experiences and one's temperament and traits. One hypothesis is that agoraphobia develops in response to repeated exposure to anxiety-provoking events. Mental health theory that focuses on how individuals react to internal emotional conflicts (psychoanalytic theory) describes agoraphobia as the result of a feeling of emptiness that comes from an unresolved Oedipal conflict which itself is a struggle between the feelings the person has towards the opposite-sex parent and a sense of competition with the same-sex parent. Although agoraphobia, like other mental disorders, is caused by a number of factors, it also tends to run in families and for some people, may have a clear genetic factor contributing to its development.

Chronic use of tranquillizers and sleeping pills such as benzodiazepine has also been linked to causing agoraphobia (Yardley, pp. 435-439). According to Ashton (pp. 655-671) when benzodiazepine dependence has been treated and after a period of abstinence, agoraphobia symptoms gradually abate.

3. Biography of Edgar Allan Poe

Being buried alive is obviously not an experience Poe himself underwent. He has not appeared to be dead nor been enclosed in a tomb or a vault while still alive; his stories are in general not autobiographical⁷. But the fact that these things have not happened exactly the way he describes in the stories does not mean that he was not influenced by real events that happened during his life and in his times.

Poe had a very hard life; his parents died while he was still very young and often through his life he was confronted by death. Many of his friends and relatives suffered from some unidentified and terminal diseases. These people had been ill for a long time and in most of the cases they remained in limbo, between life and death for a long period. Poe often visited them and even lived with them. There were certainly many cases when he was not sure whether a person was about to die or would recover. This must have been especially hard with people he loved, such as his mother and his wife.

Apart from the many people Poe lost there were many other unpleasant events that influenced his life. He drank heavily, which was the result of the many problems he endured, but also the source of many of his problems. He lost a number of his employments as he stayed away from work for many days at a time, wandering through bars and drinking excessively. As a result he was unreliable.

It is also known that Poe had many mental problems. The origin of these problems can partly be found in his difficult childhood and also in the difficult relationships he had as an adult. Whether his alcohol consumption added to his mental problems or vice versa cannot be said with certainty; one probably aggravated the other.

These negative experiences are treated in many of Poe's short stories as main themes next to the theme of being buried alive. There is often a beautiful woman who suffers from some unidentified disease; as Poe had

⁷ This biographical overview is based on the extensive work of Harvey Allen, *Israfel*.

known several women who died after a long period of suffering he was certainly influenced by their suffering when writing his stories. Another theme that appears frequently is a protagonist who suffers from a mental illness just as Poe himself did. In Poe's stories these physical and mental problems most of the time end in apparent death which leads to a main character being buried alive. Therefore it is important to know about Poe's life if we wish to understand why the theme of being buried alive is so often the subject.

3.1. Parents

Elizabeth Arnold Poe, Edgar's mother, was born in spring of the year 1787. She was an actress, and after her first husband, also an actor, died, she married David Poe. They both had engagements in Philadelphia, New York and Boston; Mrs Poe played several major roles, David only minor parts, but together they managed to make a living.

Records of Mrs. Poe's appearances in theatres indicate when her two sons were born. Her elder son William Henry Leonard Poe was born in 1807. Shortly after his birth he was left in the care of his paternal grandfather, 'General' David Poe at 19 Camden Street in Baltimore. The reason for this was simply that the Poes were very poor and could not afford a child. Edgar Poe was born in Boston on 19 January, 1809. How poor the Poe family were is demonstrated by the fact that Elizabeth was back on stage only two weeks after the birth of her son on 8 February.

In July 1810 David Poe disappeared; it is not clear whether he died or just abandoned Elizabeth. With his disappearance the mystery surrounding the Poe family began; there is much speculation about this time. Elizabeth left New York in summer of the year 1810 and went south to Richmond, accompanied by Edgar. While in Richmond in December 1810 she gave birth to her daughter Rosalie. As David Poe had already left at that time there was some doubt about the paternity of the child. Only one year later Elizabeth died of tuberculosis.

When Elizabeth died Edgar was still an infant. He was certainly not able to understand why his mother had to stay in bed so often or was not

able to play with him. But as they were very poor and were living together in only one room he heard his mother's every cough and was probably very frightened when he saw her lying in bed not being able to get up anymore. This was certainly a very traumatic experience and influenced him for the rest of his life. A child of only three years is certainly not able to understand what death means and maybe, after her burial, he even imagined her lying in the tomb and not being able to get out, as death must have been only an abstract term for a boy that young.

3.2. Foster Parents

Mrs. Frances Keeling Allan, who had been living close to where Elizabeth Poe died, became acquainted with Elizabeth and very interested in the fate and fortunes of her and her children. After Elizabeth's death Frances adopted Edgar informally, his baby sister Rosalie went with Mrs. Mackenzie, a friend of Frances.

John Allan, Elizabeth's husband, was born in Irvine, Scotland, in 1780; in his early youth he had been left an orphan and emigrated to Richmond. He, an orphan himself, was moved by Edgar's fate but did not want to make him his legal heir as he still hoped for legal children of his own. But there was also another reason which he could not present to his wife: he was already a father by two women in Richmond. With one woman he had a daughter, and with the other, Mrs Collier, a son. John maintained both of them. Some years later Edgar might have become Allan's foster child but it is not quite certain that he was adopted legally.

To visit the places of his youth and for business reasons John Allan returned to Scotland in July 1815. There Edgar attended grammar school with James Galt, his cousin, and the family stayed with Mary Allan, John's sister. Poe did not like Irvine and therefore made plans for either going back to America or to London where his 'mum' and aunt were staying. 'Aunt Mary' could stand Edgar and his moods no longer, so she packed his clothes and shipped him back to London where he was sent to boarding school. There are several mentions of Mrs. Allan suffering from ill health during the stay of the family in London. This must have been like

déjà vu. After the terrible experience of the death of his mother he had finally found someone to replace her and now this person was also very ill and might soon die, too. This was certainly not an easy situation for Edgar who was still very young.

Because of a financial crash John Allan was heavily in debt, and so he took Edgar out of school and prepared to go to America again. If Allan had been successful in Scotland, Poe would probably have been educated in England. At the end of June 1820, they set sail for New York.

3.3. 'Helen' and Elmira

Back in America Edgar found a new friend, one Robert Stanard, who introduced him to his mother. Poe and Mrs. Stanard got along very well and later he even read his verses to her; from her Poe received helpful criticism and wise encouragement. The year 1823 marked the end of Edgar's childhood; Mrs. Stanard went insane and died in April 1824 at the age of only thirty-one. She was another important woman in Poe's life who had been like a mother for him and, just like his real mother, she died and left him behind. Poe felt great grief and dedicated a poem to her, 'To Helen'. Further, schoolmaster Joseph Clarke who was very fond of Edgar had been designated the headmaster of the school Poe attended; Clarke's successor was William Burke, who insisted on strict discipline and was not as fond of Poe as his predecessor. The worst thing of all for Edgar was that his foster mother was becoming seriously ill; he loved her very much and knew that he was being maintained in John Allan's house only because of her.

On 26 March in the year 1825 William Galt from Scotland, an uncle of John Allan died and left his nephew a great fortune, which made him one of the richest men in Richmond. Poe's family once again moved in the best of Richmond's society.

In March 1825 Poe was taken away from Burke's Academy and put in the care of private tutors. During that summer he met his first love, Sarah Elmira Royster who lived in a house very close to the Allan's house. This was also the time when William Henry visited his brother Edgar; they had

only seen each other two or three times previously. Henry was tubercular but they may well have liked each other as they had a lot in common. Rosalie joined the two brothers and these were some of the few meetings where the three of them were together. The younger sister of the two boys was described as dull and immature.

3.4. First Serious Problems

The possibility of Edgar being Mr. Allan's legal heir did not escape the speculation of some ladies and their daughters but Poe was interested only in Elmira. In winter he left for the University of Virginia in Charlottesville; Mrs Allan accompanied him, and on 14 February 1826 he matriculated. For the first time in his life Poe was completely alone. No word had come from Elmira and she too had not received a single letter from him. Her parents, who had probably talked to John Allan and knew that Poe would not become John's legal heir, talked Elmira into marriage with A. Barrett Shelton, a more suitable son-in-law. It is assumed that her parents hid Poe's letters from her and so she thought he had forgotten about her and therefore agreed to marry Shelton.

Edgar soon ran into debt, mainly through gambling, as he received very little money from John Allan; it was just enough to pay for the courses. He left the university but, as his scholastic records were brilliant, it was only because of financial troubles. This was also the first time Poe's drinking habits were mentioned. There were many reasons for his drinking; first of all, it was the custom at that time at the university and secondly, it gave him confidence. But the most important reason was that it allowed him to forget. Poe had lost his intended wife; this was a great emotional crisis and frustration in his life.

A fierce quarrel during the evening of 18 March 1827 made Poe leave the house of John Allan. Poe then enlisted in the United States Army on 26 May 1827 and was stationed in Boston Harbour where he stayed until the end of October. He did very well in the army because he had very good manners and was well educated. Poe wanted to leave the army but this was not supported by John Allan. The first message he received from

his foster father was that Frances, his foster mother, had died on 28 February 1829. It had been her last wish that she would not be buried before Poe had seen her but her wish was not carried out. Poe was discharged from the service of the Army on 15 April 1829. He kept in contact with John Allan as Allan's dying wife had requested.

Poe was constantly touched by death; it seems as though every woman who was important to him left him or died. These negative experiences certainly left a strong impression on Poe's psyche. He was still very young when most of the women who influenced his life died. Maybe he often thought about them lying in their graves, hoping that they might come back, hoping they might still be alive. This may have been the beginning of Poe's obsession with the subject of being buried alive.

3.5. Mrs. Clemm

In August 1829 he began to live with the Clemm family; Maria Clemm was the sister of David Poe and therefore Edgar's aunt. In this household lived Maria Clemm, her mother, William Henry, who was Edgar's brother, and Virginia. Virginia was Mary's daughter and Edgar's cousin and was then seven years old. Henry was already seriously ill with tuberculosis which meant that Poe was again touched by death.

One year later Poe became Cadet Poe in the military academy at West Point. He soon found himself in debt again, for necessities which the parents of other students provided for them. John Allan in the meantime became engaged to Miss Louisa Gabriella Patterson from New York. On 5 October 1830 he was married to this second wife; after this he completely forgot about Edgar because now he was hoping for a legitimate heir. During that time Allan was drinking heavily, because on the 1st July his illegitimate twins by another woman were born. Poe's physical troubles also started during that time while he was at West Point; he had a weak heart, little energy and he began to drink a great deal. That was followed by several trials against Edgar for lack of discipline. It was adjudged that he be dismissed from the service of the Army. On 17 February 1831 he was given his release.

When he arrived in New York a few days later he was very poor and ill; he wrote to Allan and asked him to send some money, just enough to keep him from starving, but his letters were ignored.

On 2 August 1831 William Henry died; the year that followed remains the most mysterious in the annals of Edgar Allan Poe. In June 1832 he tried to return to Richmond, but Allan's second wife did not want to stay under the same roof because he reminded her of the first Mrs. Allan. Therefore he stayed with the Mackenzies where his sister lived and then returned to the Clemms. He began to write prose during that year; his short stories were published in the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier*. Mr Allan who had threatened to beat Edgar if he ever came close to his house again was already helpless from dropsy and died on 27 March 1834. In his will Poe was not mentioned; he was overlooked in favour of John Allan's own children.

One year later the short story *Berenice* appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*; for some time after that every edition of the *Messenger* contained a story and some criticism or review by Poe. His condition during that time was very poor; he had a weak heart, the tragedies of his youth had left him nervously exhausted, he had a general feeling of depression due to subnormal vitality, and all this 'culminated frequently in periods of more or less complete prostration or threatened collapse' (Allen, p. 298). He also was using stimulants and sedatives. When a period of weakness overtook him he resorted to one of two drugs, alcohol or opium. Stories such as *Ligeia* and *Berenice* provide references to opiate dreams; there is even evidence by witnesses that Poe took opium. During these years, from 1832 to 1847, Mary Deveraux is the only recorded love affair that Poe engaged in.

3.6. Virginia

On 22 September 1835 he was secretly married to Virginia, his cousin who was then only thirteen years old. The ceremony took place in St Paul's Episcopal Church with Mrs Clemm who had arranged the wedding and was the only witness. Rosalie, who was visiting them frequently, was

now twenty-five but only about Virginia's age mentally; she was something of an irritation to her brother. In the meantime Virginia developed tuberculosis. She was then a prototype of Poe's heroines; she approached the ideal of the desired feminine type of the time; 'delicate, consumptive, given to fainting, and languidly lying upon invalid couches; saying incredibly refined and sentimental things, and listening to denatured artificial rhapsodies; they wasted away in their wailing lover's arms, leaving them stricken with sorrow or touched by madness to haunt the lonely grave, forever inconsolable'.(Allen, p. 313). On 16 May 1836 he and Virginia were officially married with witnesses who declared that 'Virginia E. Clemm is of full age of twenty-one years'; in fact she was only nearly fourteen.

Because of Poe the *Southern Literary Messenger* became very successful; it increased its circulation from 500 to 3500 copies. His literary progress was still unexpectedly difficult and slow. This had several causes; he had arrived in New York during the height of a financial panic which led to the failure of numerous magazines and newspapers. At that time it was almost impossible to be paid for articles or stories of any kind. Poe found almost no work and turned his attention to his stories. In the summer of 1838 he was no longer able to pay the rent and therefore moved to Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia he soon found literary employment and a warm contemporary reception. He was successful in increasing the circulation of the *Messenger*, *Burton's* and *Graham's*. In 1839 he published *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In general this was a happy time; the only shadow that lay over this time was the failing health of his wife. There were days when Virginia was faint and ill and Edgar in the depth of melancholia or even in a state of semi-madness induced by a drug. He would wander around and be brought back home by some neighbour where he collapsed and lay helpless for days. Towards the end of 1839 these times became more frequent and finally he had a nervous breakdown. He drank a lot and was absent from the magazine where he worked.

At the start of 1840 he founded the *Penn Magazine*, a monthly literary journal. When the year was nearly over he had to stay in bed again because of sickness; he was far from well either in heart or brain. The stress of being unemployed didn't help and once again Mrs. Clemm was his sole support. This condition lasted until February of the following year; because of this the production of the *Penn* ended and that brought him to the verge of a mental and physical breakdown.

When this crisis had passed all went very well for Poe; during the spring of 1841 he was very busy writing. During that time he produced many short stories, not because he regarded them as a great form of art but because no other form brought in any money. *Premature Burial* for example was written during that time in Philadelphia.

3.7. Decline

When Virginia's condition became worse, so did Poe's; he drank heavily and worked but little. His descent from the year 1842 on continued. The only success of the next year was the prize he received for his most widely read story *Gold Bug*; the only other stories of importance published in 1843 were *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*.

In 1844 Poe took Virginia and Mrs. Clemm back to New York. Here he was occupied with *The Raven* which was published on 29 January 1845 in the *Evening Mirror*. It was an enormous success which made Poe widely famous and enabled him to start lecturing. By that time Poe had already developed a delusion of persecution; after he had been drinking he would every time talk of nothing but himself, his work and the jealousy of other writers.

On 30 January 1847 Virginia died from tuberculosis after a long period of illness. 'She had been married as a child to the loneliest and most ambitious man in the world. She seems to have clung to him pathetically, knowing him as no one else could. [...] About her there was, it must ever be remembered, the strange dignity of suffering and unfulfillment that requires, and yet mocks at tears' (Allen, p. 578). Virginia's death must

have had, for him, 'all the imaginative attributes of the mystic horror with which he regarded death,...' (p. 560).

His literary comeback in 1847 under the care of Mrs. Clemm and Mrs. Shew ended in failure and despair. He tried to find refuge in two love affairs with Annie and Helen Whitman in 1848. Sarah Helen Whitman had been greatly moved by *The Raven* and felt drawn to him. She also knew about the deep impression she had left on him the night he first saw her. For all these reasons she published a valentine poem to *The Raven*. During 1848 Poe and Helen wrote love letters to each other, which became famous. Mrs. Shew told him that their relationship had to end and although he wanted to marry Helen she refused because of his drinking and because she thought she was not suited for the responsibilities of a marriage as she was older than he was, a widow and an invalid. She also knew that a marriage would have brought only misery to both of them. This refusal of two women ended in an attempt at suicide. After this he became *persona non grata* to most of the literary world, so he spent the rest of spring and summer with the publication of *Eureka*.

The records of his illness, from 1847 on, show that his heart was giving out. This condition may have been the cause of his depression; in addition he showed symptoms of a lesion of the brain and he often complained about headaches. Periods when he collapsed occurred and he again resorted to drugs; he was overtaken by delirium tremens. The order of events that now took place can never be precisely reconstructed. He was arrested for being intoxicated and taken to Mayamensisig Prison where he spent a night and then went back to Richmond. Some days later he went on a steamer to Baltimore; he was in a helpless condition and was found on 3 October 1849 lying a few steps away from his house. He was taken to Washington Hospital; he no longer knew where or who he was or what he was talking about. On 7 October 1849 he died aged 40.

4. *The Premature Burial*

4.1. Background

The Premature Burial is the first of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories that comes to mind when thinking about the theme of being buried alive, especially because the theme is contained in the title. It 'embodies the whole sequence of Poe's 'buried alive' tales' (Goldman, p. 60). Therefore it is one of the best representatives of this theme and cannot be avoided when writing about Poe and being buried alive.

The Premature Burial, a horror fiction, was published on 31 July 1844 in the *Dollar Newspaper*. That was the time in Poe's life when he and Virginia and Mrs. Clemm were living in New York. Virginia was already very ill and Poe himself was drinking heavily. It was a few months before he published *The Raven* which made him famous. During that time he was writing prose because it was the only literary form that earned any money and that may also have been the reason why he chose the topic of being buried alive for his short story; it was a topic of public interest at that time.

The problem of being buried alive became publicly known and discussed, as described in the first chapter. Numerous reports of people having been buried alive appeared and people were concerned and became interested in everything that had to do with it. Poe knew about this fear of this time and the people of his time. He wanted to sell his stories and therefore he had to choose a topic that interested a lot of people, a topic that would be discussed and that people were concerned about, which would consequently mean that people might talk about his story and as a result maybe even talk about him and his poetry.

The main source of terror in this story is consciousness (Halliburton, p. 347). Poe describes vividly how it might feel to be buried alive, lying under the ground, hearing people above, maybe even one's family or friends and not being able to talk to them; the terror of smelling the cold earth and not being able to breath anymore.

The unendurable oppression of the lungs – the stifling fumes from 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 – the unseen but palpable presence of Conqueror Worm – these things, with the thoughts of the air and grass above, with memory of dear friends who would fly to save us if but informed of our fate, and with consciousness that of this fate they can never be informed – that our hopeless portion is that of the really dead – these considerations, I say, carry into the heart, which still palpitates, a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil. (Quinn and Thompson⁸, p. 672)

Poe describes the terror of a person who is still alive but is not recognized as being alive. A physician declares a person to be dead because he cannot find any recognizable signs of life but very often the physician is mistaken simply because he does not know what to look for. In some cases this can end fatally. If the relatives of the ‘deceased’ rely on the physician’s professional judgement and bury the person too soon, the person may wake up in a coffin while still alive and possibly able to recover, but that is no use if the body has already been interred. What Poe is doing here is to take this situation and this fear of the person in it and describes what he or she might be feeling according to the beliefs of 19th century population.

4.2. Record of Facts

Poe starts his story by explaining why he reported ‘real’ cases:

We thrill, for example, with the most intense of ‘pleasurable pain’ over the accounts of the Passage of the Beresina, of the Earthquake at Lisbon, of the Plague at London, of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, or of the stifling of the hundred and twenty-three prisoners in the Black Hole at Calcutta. But in these accounts it is the fact – it is the reality – it is the history which excites. (p. 666)

Poe had already recognized that people were more thrilled about stories and horrors that were actually true and not just invented. A story about a person who died a horrible death is only half as terrifying if one knows that

⁸ All quotations from Poe’s stories are cited from Patrick F. Quinn and G.R. Thompson, *Edgar Allan Poe – Poetry, Tales, & Selected Essays*.

it is invented; but if the story is true, one already heard about it or the case has even been reported in a newspaper, the incident is twice as horrible. Therefore Poe stresses from the beginning and throughout the whole story that this anecdote is based on fact.

Apart, however, from the inevitable conclusion a priori that such causes must produce such effects – that the well-known occurrence of such cases of suspended animation must naturally give rise, now and then, to premature interments – apart from this consideration, we have the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience to prove that a vast number of such interments have actually taken place. I might refer at once, if necessary to a hundred well-authenticated instances. (p. 667)

In support of the assertion that premature interment can happen and has happened Poe refers to 'real' cases in which it happened that a person was wrongly believed dead and therefore had been buried alive. Poe starts with the wife of one of the most respectable citizens - a lawyer, from Baltimore - who was suspected to be dead after a long and painful illness and was therefore taken into her family vault. Three years later the husband opened the door of the vault and found his wife erect at the door. She had still been alive when she was buried and died while trying to escape through the iron door. The second case described by Poe happened in France. A young and beautiful girl, who had married a rich diplomat instead of the young poet who loved her, died, because her husband had 'ill-treated' her. The young lover who still adored her was desperate and opened the grave to get some of her hair as a souvenir. He found her alive, she recognized that it was him who truly loved her and together they went to America. According to the story the *Chirurgical Journal of Leipsic* recorded the next case that is described by Poe. An officer of the artillery was wounded in the head. He was brought to a hospital but the physicians there could not help him and they thought that he had died. He was buried soon and a few days later a visitor to the cemetery felt a movement of the earth he was sitting on. The grave was opened and the body was found sitting nearly upright. He was taken to hospital again and survived. Another patient, in London, had died of typhoid fever. Body snatchers unearthed his 'corpse' and took him to a

private hospital. When a student conducted an experiment during which he applied a battery to the patient's muscles the patient got up from the table.

Poe refers to various cases from all over the world; this serves to emphasize that being buried alive can happen anywhere. It can happen to rich ladies as well as to young and beautiful girls or to strong officers of the military. The ways in which those errors, those ill-judged burials, are being discovered are numerous and very different. They are mostly discovered by accident because a body-snatcher has taken the corpse to a hospital or because a friend or family member has wanted to see the body again. Sometimes they are not discovered at all and the person who was buried alive has woken in sheer terror and died in the grave because he or she cannot escape and nobody has found them in time. No matter how the case of a premature burial ends, according to this story it is something that concerns everybody and therefore everyone should be informed and think about it. 'That it has frequently, very frequently, so fallen will scarcely be denied by those who think.' (p. 666)

4.3. References to Historical Facts

In *Premature Burial* Poe creates many more references to reality, making his story appear to be based on fact and real events. The times in which the story was written were marked by change, especially in medicine. There were many physicians and inventors who conducted experiments and through this discovered many new illnesses and different things about illnesses already identified. Theories that were long thought of as being valid were now proven to be wrong and new theories were established. All this led to a whole jungle of theories, every theory had many followers and no one really knew which one was valid or who to believe. During these times especially, physicians and their patients were very confused. Poe writes at the beginning of his story:

The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins? We know that there are diseases in which occur total cessations of all the apparent functions of vitality, and yet in

which these cessations are merely suspensions, properly called so. They are only temporary pauses in the incomprehensible mechanism. A certain period elapses, and some unseen mysterious principle again sets in motion the magic pinions and the wizard wheels. (pp. 666-667)

As people did not know whom to believe or which theories were valid people very often distrusted physicians, they were afraid of fatal consequences should they be treated incorrectly. People also thought that physicians were interested only in money. Poe refers to this distrust when he describes the case of the man who came back to life when a student applied a battery to the patient's muscles. Poe writes he 'fell a victim to the quackeries of medical experiment' (p. 671). When people read the story they find that the world in it is just the same as the reality they experience every day. Physicians make mistakes, they cannot be trusted and the consequences can be fatal. This, even more, makes people believe that the story is based on fact and the cases mentioned really did happen the way they are described by Poe.

4.4. Reflection on Poe's Medical Interest

Another thing that can be found in *Premature Burial* is Poe's interest in medicine, in its changes and in its progress. The first hint of this is in the part where he writes about the wife of a famous lawyer who after a long illness was supposed to be dead.

She presented all the ordinary appearances of death. The face assumed the usual pinched and sunken outline. The lips were of the usual marble pallor. The eyes were lustreless. There was no warmth. Pulsation had ceased. For three days the body was preserved unburied, during which it had acquired a stony rigidity. The funeral, in short, was hastened, on account of the rapid advance of what was supposed to be decomposition. (p. 667)

Poe here refers to the ongoing discussion about signs of death. At that time there were many different theories about what signs of death were and what were not, and if they were signs, it was not sure if they were certain or uncertain signs of death. A reason for these discussions had certainly been the discoveries about the human body that were made

during that time, but also the fact that it did sometimes happen that people were thought to be dead and then suddenly they revived. Poe was even knowledgeable about what sorts of mistakes were made when a person had been declared dead:

Sometimes the patient lies, for a day only, or even for a shorter period, in a species of exaggerated lethargy. He is senseless and externally motionless; but the pulsation of the heart is still faintly perceptible; some traces of warmth remain; a slight color lingers within the centre of the cheek; and, upon application of a mirror to the lips, we can detect a torpid, unequal, and vacillating action of the lungs. (pp. 672-673)

He describes here what signs of life can be found and what a doctor has to take care about when examining a patient. The problem of burying people too fast and therefore sometimes alive is also described here. Because of epidemics like yellow fever or the pest people were buried only a few hours after they had been declared dead. This was to make sure that contagion was avoided but sometimes also because it was very hot and preserving someone for a few days would mean a terrible smell. Poe already knew about these problems and what signs to look for to make sure that someone is really dead. He must have shown great interest in medical progress or at least he was informed about the latest developments, otherwise he would not have known what signs the doctors of that time were searching for in order to establish whether a person was alive or dead.

The next sign of Poe's interest in medicine, progress and science is when he mentions in his story the last case, the man who came back to life when a battery was applied to his muscles. Here he refers to the *galvanic battery*. Luigi Galvani was one of the first scientists who experimented with electricity on humans. He died in 1789 but his experiments provided a basis for many succeeding scientists and experiments. When Poe wrote *Premature Burial* the knowledge that was revealed by those experiments was still very new and not everyone was informed about what was being tested and what the results were. But Poe seems to have known a great deal about medical science otherwise he

would not have been able to write about the galvanic battery being applied to the muscles of a dead person.

One purpose of writing about the galvanic battery was certainly that it is again a relation to reality that some people who read this story know what is going on in medicine and therefore the story might sound as though based on facts, like an event that has really happened this way. Another purpose might have been that Poe wanted to inform people ignorant about current medical development, about what was happening in science, to raise their interest in this topic. Or he simply wanted to show that he was very intelligent and knew a lot about medicine and its latest developments. Perhaps he wanted to stress that he was someone who had to be taken seriously.

Poe knew much more about the latest medical developments. He was even informed about what was being done to avoid premature burial. When he writes that 'for three days the body was preserved unburied' he refers to current practices for diagnosing death. Decomposition was seen by most people as the only certain sign that someone was dead and therefore it was suggested by many physicians that the body should be preserved for at least three days. Decomposition would begin and people could be absolutely sure that the person was dead.

For some people this was not enough. They were still afraid of being buried alive even if they knew that their body would be preserved for some days. They feared that they would wake up in their coffin and would have no chance of escaping, which was the reason why security coffins were constructed. As explained in the introductory chapter, many different suggestions about construction were made, about which one might actually work or which one could actually be used in a cemetery. There were many problems linked to it, for example making it affordable for all people and not just the rich, or constructing a mechanism that enabled the buried to operate it without much effort, because the buried would be very weak and not have much strength if he or she woke up after days without eating or drinking. Poe was informed about these developments too.

When the narrator talks about his fears, he describes what sort of precautions he has taken.

I had the family vault so remodelled as to admit of being readily opened from within. The slightest pressure upon a long lever that extended far into the tomb would cause the iron portal to fly back. There were arrangements also for the free admission of air and light, and convenient receptacles for food and water, within immediate reach of the coffin intended for my reception. This coffin was warmly and softly padded, and was provided with a lid, fashioned upon the principle of the vault door, with the addition of springs so contrived that the feeblest movement of the body would be sufficient to set it at liberty. Besides all this, there was suspended from the roof of the tomb, a large bell, the rope of which, it was designed, should extend through a hole in the coffin, and so be fastened to one of the hands of the corpse. (p. 676)

This description of how a vault is remodelled and constructed to make sure the person will be able to escape in case of awakening is not something unrealistic which Poe made up. It expresses the fears of the people of his time and the arrangements that were made as a result. In this story and especially in this paragraph many readers of Poe's times will have recognized themselves and their own fears.

4.5. Psychological Aspects

Another aspect of *The Premature Burial* is the psychological view Poe employs to construct the story and its horror. At the time this story was written psychology was not a very sophisticated branch of science. There was too little knowledge about the brain and how it worked. It was a scientific domain that still needed to be explored. But there were already a few men who had started to investigate the mind and especially how mind and body act and react with one another. One of those men was Benjamin Rush who has already been mentioned in chapter 1. Rush was very progressive for his age as he was occupied with the dependence of body and mind on the physical and social environment.

Poe even here was very well informed. Although psychology was a very young science it can be found in his stories. The first description of a psychological phenomenon we get is when Poe writes: 'I hesitated to ride,

or to walk, or to indulge in any exercise that would carry me from home.’ What Poe describes here is a definition of agoraphobia. People who suffer from that kind of phobia become anxious in unfamiliar environments. Sometimes they even do not leave home or their ‘safety zone’ anymore. Activities that trigger a panic attack are avoided too. These activities include exercise and that is exactly what Poe’s narrator is afraid of.

Poe cannot have known the term ‘agoraphobia’ because it is a rather new term and it did not exist in his times. What he probably knew was the clinical picture of this illness as he describes it nearly perfectly. ‘The ghastly Danger to which I was subjected haunted me day and night.’ (p. 675). The fear of agoraphobics that they might have a panic attack, that they might get into a situation from which they cannot escape and from which they might even die is ubiquitous. Therefore they take elaborate precautions; they make sure they are in familiar places from which they can escape easily, they carry certain things such as pills with them or they make sure they are accompanied by a friend or someone who knows about their illness. ‘Accompanied by a friend I had proceeded on a gunning expedition.’ (p. 678)

Poe describes this phobia in great detail; he must have known a lot about it. Either he has observed a person who suffered from it or he had experienced attacks of his own. Poe’s condition at the time *The Premature Burial* was written ‘seems to have arisen from the sense of oppression and inevitable catastrophe which had long been a concomitant of his melancholia, or some dream of smothering, perhaps due to his heart trouble.’ (Allen, p. 486). It is known that Poe himself had many physical and psychological problems. He had taken a lot of drugs and had consumed a lot of alcohol. All this could have led to his psychological problems and vice versa. So the attacks Poe’s narrator describes might well have been experienced by Poe himself.

But whether he has only observed this phenomenon or experienced it himself, he knew about the relationship between body and mind when it became illness. When the narrator talks about his condition he states that ‘apart from the tendency to trance, however, my general health appeared

to be good.’ This statement already suggests knowledge of the interdependence of body and mind, otherwise he would not have stressed that his general health was good. And at the end of the story the narrator himself realises this relationship and acts accordingly:

I dismissed forever my charnel apprehensions and with them vanished the cataleptic disorder, of which, perhaps, they had been less the consequence than the cause. (p. 679)

Here the narrator clearly concludes that his physical problems were a result of his mental condition and when he changed his attitude towards psychological problems even his physical problems vanished. This is a very progressive point of view. Here again Poe proves that he knew about the latest developments in science, that he was not only very interested but well informed. For the story this ending and this insight to the narrator are a relief to the reader. The reader can relax again and is left with a slightly positive feeling towards the story, the topic and his own future. Poe makes the reader realize that their own happiness and their own mental and physical health depend a lot on attitude and the way one lives his or her life.

4.6. Summary

The Premature Burial is one of the best examples of the theme of being buried alive. Poe starts with describing ‘real’ cases of four very different people and then goes on with a narrator who tells of his own experiences. Throughout the story Poe stresses that everything is based on fact and that all the events described really happened.

Terror in this story is mainly created through this relationship with reality and through consciousness. Relations with reality are created by references to medical facts. Poe knows much about the latest developments in science and uses this knowledge to make his story seem realistic. He was not only informed about medical matters that had long been established but also about what was happening in his time, about findings that were new and certainly not generally known.

Another relation to reality is the description and the use of psychological phenomena. Poe knows perfectly well how to create tension and anticipation in his story. He must have been a very good observer of others or he experienced a lot of those feelings himself. Those feelings include the fear of being in a situation from which escape is impossible and dying becoming inevitable. This fear was observed in actual cases throughout history and on the other hand also in the times in which Poe lived. People knew that being buried alive was something that could happen and Poe used this fear. He 'plays' with people's fears, not only with realistic fears but also with those that result from psychological problems such as agoraphobia, which was certainly not too well known back then but already very well observed and described by Poe.

The reason why Poe stresses that his story is based on reality is explained at the beginning of the story. People are more interested in cases and events that really happened. Actual events are more thrilling than fiction and people therefore will more probably read the story if they think it is based on fact; that was Poe's main concern. During that time he was writing prose because it was the only genre that paid and as Poe needed money very urgently he had to make sure that his stories were read.

5. THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

5.1. Background

The theme of being buried alive seems to be only one among many others in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, such as for example the doppelganger theme, the death of a beautiful woman and mental illness. But when considering the symbols, the references and the reflections in this short story that all point towards death and decay they become a central theme. In this story Poe did not directly refer to actual historical events, rather he created a story where everything is related and linked by symbols.

The Fall of the House of Usher was first published in September 1839 in *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine*. This was the time in Poe's life when he had moved to Philadelphia to start his literary career, as he had just failed in New York. In general this was a happy time for Poe as he increased the circulation of the *Messenger*, *Burton's* and *Graham's*. The only shadow hanging over this otherwise happy time was Virginia becoming ill.

Critics in the past as well as nowadays have reacted contrarily to this story. On the one hand, Poe was praised for *The Fall of the House of Usher* as being the best example of his 'totality', where 'every detail and element is related and relevant' (Beebe, p 123). On the other hand, he was and is criticized for being too formulaic. Some critics think Poe too strictly followed his own patterns established in *Morella* and *Ligeia* using stock characters in stock scenes and stock situations. Another point he was criticized for was using repetitive themes like an unidentifiable disease, madness and resurrection (Krutch, p 77).

5.2. The House

The House is one of the examples which show that everything is related and linked. The term 'house' refers on the one hand to the castle-like building and on the other hand to the family. At the beginning of the story the narrator himself speculates about why this is the case.

I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was the deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of the centuries, might have exercised upon the other – it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the “House of Usher” – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion (pp. 318-319).

In this passage the narrator explains that the house has always been inhabited by members of the Usher family and that the building has always been passed from father to son. Therefore the family living in the house has always had the same name and the building has also always been referred to as the ‘House of Usher’. This directly relates the family members to the building. For the story this relation means that the fate of the building and the fate of the people living in it are connected. If something happens to the house it has a direct influence on the family members and vice versa.

The house can be seen as the first ‘character’ that is introduced, as it is presented as if it was a human being. When the narrator is riding through the country to visit his childhood friend he is finally ‘within view of the melancholy House of Usher’ (p. 317). He is very impressed and unsettled by the appearance of the building and describes what he is seeing.

I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – [...]. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the remodelled

and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows. (p. 317)

The narrator describes the house in a way that makes the reader think of a skull rising out of the earth. The windows resembling the eyes and the water reflecting the features even emphasize this image. This scene is the first symbol of a premature burial. It makes the reader think of a person having been buried and now trying to escape from the grave. With the head rising out of the earth the subject is about to revive and confront those who interred him with this terrible mistake. And as the building and the family members are connected, it suggests to the reader what is going to happen to the family.

From a psychological point of view the house may also stand for a vault or a tomb. The inhabitant Roderick Usher is still alive and has also been healthy for many years, but still he was and is not able to leave the house. It seems as if he is caught in it and has no chance of escaping. This is one more picture Poe uses to present the feeling of being buried alive. Roderick is alive but it seems that no one knows about this – he does not have any contact with people from the outside. His only connected figure is his sister who is also enclosed in the house. He tries to escape this condition of being locked in by seeking contact with his childhood friend. This is the only connection to the outside world – outside of 'his tomb'.

The narrator is also aware of these signs of decay surrounding the house but he continues to observe its condition. First of all he describes the atmosphere that encloses the building and the surrounding scenery.

...an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilence and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. (p. 319)

The condition of the house is described as though he is talking about someone who suffers from a severe illness. The narrator even uses the word 'pestilence'. Usually these words and pictures are not used to describe the condition of a house but rather to describe the state of health

of a person. This once more stresses that the house is perceived as a real person who is directly related to the destiny of the Usher family.

Looked at historically, the picture of the house slowly collapsing or 'dying' presents one of the many unidentifiable diseases people and especially physicians of that time had to cope with during the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. As medical science was just at its beginnings there were many symptoms which physicians could not explain or did not understand. They could only observe the decay of a person and the condition getting worse without being able to impede consequent death.

This impotence of medical men to defeat certain diseases certainly had a strong influence on people of that age. Not only did they have to watch their relatives or friends slowly fading away without being able to help, they also feared that this might even happen to them. This anxiety influenced the whole century, and Poe, on the one hand, used this fear for his stories to thrill his readers and, on the other hand, he himself had a lot of problems that resulted from this medical disability. Many members of his family became seriously ill and he had to watch them dying. These experiences certainly left a strong impression on Poe's psyche and he had to find a way to work through these traumatic experiences. One way of doing so has apparently been by incorporating this theme into his stories.

5.3. Roderick Usher

When the narrator enters the house he finds his friend Roderick Usher in a condition just as bad as the house's. This does not totally surprise him as it was the reason for his visit. Roderick had written a letter begging him to come, he 'spoke of acute bodily illness – of a mental disorder which oppressed him' (p. 317). Here Poe again refers to latest scientific developments of his time. Some scientists were starting to investigate the brain and the connection between medical and physical problems. When Roderick writes in his letter about both bodily illness and mental disorder, he gives the impression that he is not quite sure whether the reason for his condition is of physical or psychological origin. This emphasizes the

reference to the new findings of mental and physical health depending on each other and mental illness being able to cause physical problems.

For the short story, this dependence of physical and mental condition means that a very mystical and also a rather unearthly atmosphere is created. Certainly not every one of Poe's readers knew about this connection of mind and body and reading about it and imagining it might have created a feeling of chill and even anxiety. This is a technique Poe often uses to create tension, which made his stories popular and widely spread. On the other hand this is also a way for Poe to show that he is interested in and informed about scientific developments.

The narrator, although prepared for the condition his friend was in, is still shocked when he sees how ill Roderick is.

I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the man being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. [...] A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and breadth of nostrils unusual in similar formations. [...] The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. (p. 321)

Roderick Usher, just like the building, shows traces of decay. They seem to age and die together. One might get the impression that the state of health of the one depends on the condition of the other.

Another feature that connects the building and Roderick is described later in the story. The narrator learns that his friend had not left the house for a long time for some superstitious reason.

I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth – in regard to an influence whose superstitious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated [...]. (p. 323)

This inability to leave the house stresses on the one hand the strong connection that exists between the inhabitant and the building, which can

be seen as a symbol for a vault he is caught in, as described above. On the other hand it is nowadays a rather certain sign that a person is suffering from a mental illness such as agoraphobia. People who suffer from agoraphobia are often not able to leave the house; they see the house as their 'safety zone'. They know their house and feel that at home nothing can happen to them, whereas if they left the house they would be in great danger. This feeling chains them to their house and as a consequence these people do often lose social contacts as they are not able to go out and meet people.

Nor is Roderick able to leave the house; what keeps him in is the illness of his sister. He thinks that if he leaves her alone something might happen to her. It is not clear if he worries about her simply because she is his sister, or because they are connected by destiny and if something might happen to her this would probably mean that something might happen to him too.

5.4. Madeline

Although the illness and condition of the house and Roderick seem to depend on each other and might be the sole explanation for the descent of the others there is still another factor that influences this mutual decay.

He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin – to the severe and long-continued illness – indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution – of a tenderly beloved sister – his sole companion for many years – his last and only relative on earth. (p. 323)

Not only do both siblings suffer from a strange illness, they also depend on each other in many ways. On the one hand, they are related and as we learn later, even twins, so they are already strongly connected. On the other hand, they are the last two descendants of the Usher family, a factor which holds them together even more closely. The house and the two Usher siblings build a triangle in which everything and everyone influences the condition of the others.

This relation between Roderick and Madeline can be compared to that of Poe and Virginia. Although Poe's stories are certainly not autobiographical, there are still some parallels that can be found. Roderick and Madeline are siblings, but still it is not exactly clear what their relationship is. There seems to be some sexual or at least a romantic feature to this connection. When Madeline had started to get seriously ill, so Roderick stated in the story, he himself also became unwell, and as her condition deteriorated, so did his.

Poe had lived for a long time with Mrs Clemm and her daughter Virginia who was thirteen years younger than he was. In the beginning he must have seen her as his little sister, but then she became more mature and for many different reasons they married when she was only thirteen and Poe already twenty-six years old. Virginia adored Poe and he was also very fond of her. He taught her a lot of things and brought her into a totally new world. When she started to show the first signs of tuberculosis he started to drink heavily, and every time she had a bad attack, he totally lost self-control and sometimes even went missing for a few days. This very much mirrors the relationship of Roderick and Madeline.

“Her decease,” he said, with a bitterness I can never forget, “would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers. (p. 323)

Madeline's condition is severe, not even the physician knows what to do. So she continues to worsen until finally she has to stay in bed. This mysterious condition that cannot be cured reflects again the situation of medicine at the times of Poe.

The situation escalates when Madeline dies. Roderick suggests preserving ‘her corpse for a fortnight’ in one of the family vaults before finally burying her.

The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to

oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution. (pp. 328-329).

The precautions described here were very popular at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Medical science was improving rapidly which led to many new discoveries, but physicians also realised that there was still a great deal they did not know about and that still had to be discovered. People tried everything to avoid fatal consequences that might result out of medical malpractice and therefore took many precautions.

But although Roderick took many precautions to avoid his sister being buried alive, the reader can foretell what is going to happen when reading the following lines.

[...] the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it [the vault], were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges. (p. 329)

Although the narrator is talking about the door being 'protected', the reader knows that this also means there is no possibility of escape. This immediately creates the picture of being in a situation where there is no way out and no help can be received.

Physicians of that time agreed that decomposition was the only certain sign of death. Therefore it was suggested that people who had died should be preserved for a few days before being buried. If the person showed signs of decomposition after about three days it was thought to be safe to bury him or her because then they would be 'really dead'. Roderick complies with these few days of preserving the corpse, but he keeps her in a closed vault from which there is no escape and where nobody can hear her. This can be interpreted the following way: Roderick is so convinced and so afraid of his and their fate that subconsciously he does everything to make this prediction come true. He could easily have prevented his sister and, with her, himself from being buried alive, simply by preserving

her in a room out of which escape is uncomplicated but it seems that he goes along with his fate.

When the narrator and Roderick leave the tomb they take one last glance at the deceased. The narrator appears unsettled when he describes how she looked:

The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptic character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon her lip which is so terrible in death. (p. 329)

The reader gets the feeling that the narrator tries to convince himself that Madeline is really dead. Although he describes the blush on her face and the smile on her mouth as 'usual in all maladies' he does not sound very confident. Her look is very suspicious and the reader is left with the wish to stop Roderick and the narrator and keep them from leaving Madeline alone in the vault. This passage makes the narrator look rather like a passive observer, who is only at the house to tell the story to us, rather than an active participant in the happening.

5.5. Madeline resurrects

The tragedy takes its course a few days later when the narrator and Roderick sit together reading a book. It is the middle of the night but they are not able to sleep because of a terrible storm that keeps them awake. The situation is extremely sinister, every time the narrator reads a passage of the book out aloud and a noise is mentioned, they both have the feeling that they can really hear it. Suddenly the door opens; Madeline comes in and attacks her brother.

For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (p. 335)

Madeline has managed to escape from the vault and is now confronting her brother who had put her there. She is very weak as she is very ill and had been lying in the vault for a few days without nutrition and the escape itself has also been exhausting. She uses her last power to attack the one who is responsible for what happened to her. They both collapse and so it seems that their destiny has been fulfilled.

The narrator who has watched the scene flees from the mansion which is destroyed by a whirlwind.

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tan at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “*House of Usher*.” (pp. 335-336)

When the building collapses it seems that the three of them, Roderick, Madeline and the house have followed their destiny and are connected even in death.

The end of this story is not very satisfactory as it is not clear if Roderick has really died or what exactly the reason for his death might have been. The fact that Madeline attacked him does not necessarily mean that Roderick has been killed. He might have had a shock and fainted, which would not necessarily mean that he is dead. Even the house collapsing on them does not necessarily mean that they have died. They could still be alive and buried under the debris. So this, again, is a technique by Poe to create tension; he leaves the reader without the sure knowledge of what has happened. They could still be alive and consequently be buried alive under the remains of house.

This end may have been disturbing for people of Poe's time. They were worried about being buried anyway, and thinking about the siblings under the remains of the house and not knowing for certain whether they are dead or alive was certainly disquieting.

5.6. Summary

The Fall of the House of Usher is constructed like a triangle that consists of Roderick, Madeline and the house. Each seems to depend on the other two and influence one another's fate. What their destiny is the narrator finds out when he rides towards the house. It is in very dark and damp surroundings and shows many signs of decay. But not only the house shows signs of decay; Roderick who had written a letter to the narrator begging him to come and visit him is also very ill and seems to have aged rapidly. As the reason for this he mentions the condition of his twin sister Madeline who suffers from an unidentified disease. All signs as well as all the action point towards death and decay and everyone seems to accept his or her fate and does not try to change anything.

Because of their illnesses the Usher twins cannot leave the house and Roderick does not have any contact with the outside world except with the narrator. This situation of a person being 'trapped' in a house conforms to the agoraphobic fear of not being able to leave the house. Some agoraphobic persons are afraid of leaving the house; they see their home as their 'safety zone' where nothing can happen to them. If they left the house, they think, they might get into a dangerous situation from which there is no escape. Their only chance to meet other people is to invite them home.

Roderick is also caught in his house. He cannot go out because he fears that something might happen to his sister if he does so. As they are strongly connected and his sister can be seen as a part of him, this would also mean that something might happen to him. Just like any agoraphobic he is very lonesome, and his only chance to have contact with the outside world is to invite other people into his home. This situation in *The Fall of the House of Usher* represents the psychological picture of being buried alive.

The historical representation of the theme of being buried alive is when Madeline is buried and Roderick preserves her for a few days in a vault. This shows the burial customs of the age Poe lived in. People knew that there had been cases of premature burial and therefore preservation until

signs of decomposition occurred was their way of making sure a person was really dead.

Another component that can be found in the story is the parallel to Poe's own life. He was married to his young cousin who was very ill and often in a state near death. Roderick is the twin brother but the story makes the reader suggest that there is still another relationship between the siblings. And just as in Poe's life the woman is very ill. In the story this leads to her being incorrectly believed dead and therefore buried alive.

The components that might have influenced Poe to write this story and use the theme of being buried alive are manifold. On the one hand he has certainly found inspiration in the medical background of his age and the fear of the people who lived at that time; on the other hand he might also have been influenced by his subconscious feelings and his own experience.

6. *The Pit and the Pendulum*

6.1. Background

The Pit and the Pendulum was written and first published in 1842 when Poe was already drinking heavily, a result of Virginia's condition getting worse. During that time he did not write much nor did he publish a lot. This story is about the torments suffered by a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition; it is a study of the effect terror has. This way of writing was not something new which Poe created but was rather an established model of terror writing of his day, often seen in *Blackwood's Magazine*. That he used an established model of writing is probably explained by the fact that he was going through hard times and the main reason he published stories was to earn money.

In this story Poe does not write about supernatural events or mysterious diseases as in many other stories. *The Pit and the Pendulum* describes a situation that could probably happen to anybody but Poe does not make the story look like a report of a real case as he inverts many historical facts. Apart from that, it is not documented that the Spanish Inquisition ever used torture methods such as the ones described in the story.

Although the story is about a situation that could probably have happened, Poe does not concentrate on facts or what is historically correct. It is not even mentioned what crime the prisoner committed. Poe prefers to concentrate on phobias and fear, on the psychological aspect. The story is especially effective in inspiring fear because Poe stresses the perception of the senses. At the beginning the prisoner cannot see anything as the room is totally dark and therefore he starts by exploring his surroundings and describes what he hears, feels and smells. This impression is enhanced through the focus on sensation. Poe further emphasizes this with words like 'crescent', 'surcingle', 'cessation', 'scimitar' and various other forms of sibilance.

This anxiety of the reader is reduced because he knows that the narrator will survive. In the beginning the reader learns that the narrator himself has written the story shortly after the events had happened.

6.2. Structure

The Pit and the Pendulum can be seen as divided into three parts: the first part is like a dream-sequence; the narrator is very weak and keeps losing consciousness. The second part begins when the dream stops and the narrator wakes up and starts to explore his surroundings. The third and final part is when the torture begins and the narrator realizes where he is and what is happening.

The first part seems to consist of many dream sequences that are interrupted by short periods of consciousness. The narrator sees, in his dreams, what has happened to him. It becomes clear that he is dreaming when he describes the scene of him being sentenced and talks about the white candles as 'slender angels' (p. 491). He is not awake and does not know exactly where he is and what has happened. But he realizes that he is dreaming because, when he is awake between two sequences of dream, he thinks about dreams in general, about not being able to remember them exactly.

After this he describes how he starts to awaken. It is not a fast or sudden awakening. He slowly starts to realize that he has been without consciousness and now he wakes up slowly. His senses come back and he feels his body coming back to mobility; he is not yet strong enough to fully wake and suddenly he falls back into unconsciousness again.

The second part starts when he has finally regained full consciousness. He knows that his eyes are still closed, but as he is afraid of opening them he starts to reach out with his hands. Then the narrator quickly opens his eyes but everything stays black and dark and he struggles for breath. He knows that he is not dead but he does not know where he is. Out of fear he waves his arms wildly and then stands up to make sure he is not in a tomb.

After having found out that he has not been buried he starts to think about the Spanish Inquisition which sentenced him and about the rumours he has heard of the horrors of Toledo, especially of the dungeons they used. Slowly he starts to realize where he is, what has happened and what is probably going to happen. He explores the dungeon he is kept in and becomes so exhausted that he lapses back into sleep again.

The third part is about the torture he has to bear. He wakes up again and suddenly the room is lit up and he is able to see the objects around him, which is already the beginning of his torture. He tries to escape but every time he manages to escape one threat he has to face another. In the end he is saved by General Lasalle and the French army.

6.3. First Part: Apparent Death?

Although the narrator is not literally buried alive his situation can still be compared to that of a premature burial. The first part of the story, when the narrator keeps losing consciousness and changes between dream and vigilance, can be compared to the situation of a person appearing to be dead. The person is not able to move or to communicate, people around do not know that the person might still realize what is going on around him or her. The second part of the story, when the person wakes resembles the situation of someone buried alive who wakes up in a grave and slowly realizes what has happened. And finally the third part can be compared to the struggle of the buried person who tries to escape the grave, and as in the story, escape certain death.

In the first part there are many hints that make the reader think of apparent death. The narrator himself describes his situation:

I had swooned; but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost. What of it there remained I will not attempt to define, or even to describe;...(p. 492)

In this part of *The Pit and the Pendulum* the narrator has to cope with a rather unusual state of health. He is very weak, because he has gone through a painful trial and he is extremely fearful. Consequently he keeps

losing consciousness; he knows that he is not just sleeping because whenever he regains consciousness he is not able to stay awake and he immediately passes out again.

What makes the situation comparable to that of apparent death is that the narrator himself is not able to describe his condition; he knows that he is not just sleeping but he cannot define what state he is in. He only feels that he has lost control over his body. This state of apparent death means that reflexes, respiration and heartbeat are reduced so significantly that they can easily be overlooked. The person is beyond casual unconsciousness and not able to wake up.

Another parallel to apparent death is drawn when the narrator describes how he regains consciousness.

Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound – the tumultuous motion of the heart, and, in my ears, the sound of its beating. (p. 493)

The narrator feels life coming back. When a person is apparently dead he or she does not show any signs of life because everything is reduced to a minimum. What is described here is how it might feel to the apparently dead person when these vital signs, like the heartbeat, become ascertainable again.

6.4. Second Part: Premature Interment?

The second part starts at the moment the narrator regains consciousness. He starts to realize that he is not in his familiar surroundings but he does not really know what exactly has happened or where he is. Through fear of what might have happened he does not want to open his eyes.

So far, I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back, unbound. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. There I suffered it to remain for many minutes, while I strove to imagine where and *what* I could be. I longed, yet dared not to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing

to see. At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. (p. 493)

The narrator is afraid that he is lying in a coffin and that he has been buried alive. He fears that if he opens his eyes and can see nothing but darkness his apprehension that he is lying in a grave will be confirmed. But he knows that he cannot keep his eyes closed forever because this will not change the situation. So, finally, he opens his eyes and the nightmare comes true: everything is totally black.

This passage is a direct connection to the topic of premature burial. Poe creates a situation that exactly describes the fear of a person being prematurely interred and then waking up in the coffin and having to face a futile situation.

Soon the narrator finds out that he is not lying in a coffin, but there is still the chance that he has been brought to a vault in which he is now enclosed.

I at once started at my feet, trembling convulsively in every fibre. I thrust my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing; yet dreaded to move a step, lest I should be embedded by the walls of a tomb. (p. 494)

Now the narrator wants to make absolutely sure that he has not been buried alive. He goes on exploring his prison to find out what has happened to him. After he has determined that he is situated in a much bigger place than a vault, he feels slightly relieved, because 'it seemed evident that mine was not, at least, the most hideous of fates.' (p. 494)

Although it now becomes clear that this is not a story that describes a case of premature interment, there are still many other connections to that topic to be found. The narrator is caught in a place from which there is no escape and he has a premonition of what his fate is going to be. 'That the result would be death, and a death of more than customary bitterness, I knew too well....' (p. 494). This is just the thought a prematurely interred person might have when waking up in a grave.

6.5. Third Part: Mortal fear

With the third part the torture starts. The narrator has now realized ‘- with what horror it is needless to say –’ (p. 499) what situation he is in and that escape will be very complicated or nearly impossible. He becomes desperate and goes through an extreme change of emotions.

What boots it to tell of the long, long hours of horror more than mortal...[...] I prayed – wearied heaven with my prayer... . I grew frantically mad, and struggled to heaven with my prayer [...]. I prayed – I wearied heaven with my prayer [...]. I grew frantically mad, [...]. And then I fell suddenly calm, [...]. (pp. 499-500)

When he has realized that there is no way out he starts to pray. He knows that it is beyond his own resources to find a way out and therefore he turns to God. In this situation it seems to him the only reasonable thing to do; he has to do something, he cannot just lie and wait and, as he is not able to find a way out, he hopes for a supernatural way.

After this first phase of desperation and hopelessness he calms down and starts to think logically. He knows that God won't come and open a door for him; he has to become active and try to escape. A prematurely buried person would probably act in the same way. First he or she would pray for God's help but then would probably scream to be heard by others or try to escape using their own strength. Poe made the situation of the closed-in narrator very strongly resemble that of a prematurely buried person. Both know that they will more probably than not die, both are on their own and know that they cannot hope for help from another person.

Then the narrator starts to take action; he is even successful. He manages to escape some dangers and threats but he knows that this will help only temporarily.

For the moment, at least, I was free. [...] Free! – I had but escaped death in one form of agony, to be delivered unto worse than death in some other. (p. 503)

Having escaped one dangerous situation does not mean that the threat is over and that the narrator will survive; it just means that the remaining time is extended and there might still be a chance of survival.

This is just like a prematurely interred person managing somehow to escape from the coffin only to find out that the coffin has been placed in vault of stone with an iron door that is closed.

6.6. The Escape

The story ends with the narrator escaping death as a result of the French Army defeating the Spanish Inquisition. What is noticeable about this ending is that he does not escape on his own but he has been saved by General Lasalle. Without this help he would not have been able to escape and would therefore more probably than not have died.

The reason why this is noticeable is that it resembles the way prematurely interred persons are sometimes saved. When they wake up in a coffin that has already been buried it is impossible for them to get out on their own. Their only hope is that they call attention to themselves so that someone hears them and then they probably will be saved. Another possibility in the time of Poe was that a body-snatcher had opened the grave in order to steal the body and sell it to a doctor for medical tests. Then the interred would also be found and saved. But in any case people in a grave hardly had any chance of getting out on their own.

6.7. The Spanish Inquisition and the Unidentified Disease

If a parallel is to be drawn between *The Pit and the Pendulum* and a case of an apparently dead person who has been interred, there has to have been a reason why the person is in a vault anyway. In the case of a person who is apparently dead this is very often the result of an unidentified illness.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century medical knowledge was not as developed as it is today; there were many diseases that had not yet been explored and that people and even doctors did not totally

understand. Very often they did not know how it was passed on from one person to another, what exactly it did to the body, how it killed and how it could be cured. There were many myths and rumours surrounding these diseases and medicine in general.

Poe also chose a cause for the imprisonment of the narrator, a cause that was surrounded by myths about the Spanish Inquisition. People had heard of the Inquisition but it had reached its height much earlier and so no one really knew how the inquisitors worked and how or where their prisoners were kept.

And now, as I still continued to step cautiously onward, there came thronging upon my recollection a thousand vague rumors of the horrors of Toledo. Of the dungeons there had been strange things narrated – fables I had always deemed them – but yet strange, and too ghastly to repeat , ... (p. 494)

Poe included these rumours, this parallel to unidentified diseases, in the story. The narrator is thinking about his situation and his tormentors, and everything he has heard about them now comes to his mind.

Dying from an unidentified disease is even nowadays certainly horrible and probably even very painful, but it must have been extremely terrifying in Poe's time when medicine was not greatly developed. Nobody knew what symptoms would show up next or how much time there was left for the ill person before he or she died. Sometimes doctors managed to help a person and so held off death for a while, but they were not able to cure these diseases. The person in the story is also able to escape death for a while.

And the death just avoided, was of that very character which I had regarded as fabulous and frivolous in the tales respecting the Inquisition. To the victims of its tyranny, there was the choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors. (p. 496)

But although he was able to gain a bit of time he knows that he is not yet free of the threat. The Spanish Inquisition is lurking somewhere in the dark waiting for another chance to attack him. Poe's story might have been

inspired by watching people die from tuberculosis. Sometimes it seemed as if they would die soon, they had seizures during which they coughed blood. The sick person and the people around must have thought that that would be the end but sometimes those people recovered. Still this did not mean they were healed; this only meant that the disease was temporarily defeated.

6.8. Summary

The story of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, although placed in realistic surroundings, does not concentrate on historical facts, medical knowledge or cases that could really have happened; it concentrates on the psychological aspect of a subject being buried alive. What creates the horror in this story is the fear that comes from knowing that there is no way out and the concentration on the senses through which the narrator experiences this fear.

The plot of the story is not literally a case of premature interment, but there are many parallels, that remind of this theme. The structure of the story seems to resemble a case of premature interment. In the first part the narrator is without consciousness but not in an ordinary state of dreaming; this can be compared to apparent death. In the second part the narrator wakes up and is afraid he has been buried alive. This is a direct reference to the topic of premature burial. And finally the third part describes how the 'prematurely interred' tries to escape. In the end he survives, not because he was able to escape on his own but because he was saved by another person, which is the only way a prematurely interred person might be saved.

Poe even found a threat to the life of the narrator that is just as mysterious and terrifying as an unidentified disease, namely the Spanish Inquisition. All these components together perfectly resemble the case of a person being buried while still alive.

In *The Pit and the Pendulum* Poe does not directly refer to any historical events or 'real cases' of premature burials as he does in other stories; he rather seems inspired by the fear of people of his time and uses

this fear to create a story. Another possibility is that he wrote about the feeling of being closed in and having no chance to escape which would resemble the clinical picture of agoraphobia.

7. *Berenice*

7.1. Background

When *Berenice* was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in March 1835, Poe's condition was already becoming really serious. He had a weak heart, the traumatic experiences of his childhood left him nervously exhausted and he was already using stimulants and sedatives. When he was caught in a period of collapse he resorted either to alcohol or opium. Apart from these problems 1835 was also the year when Poe married his young cousin Virginia.

Berenice is one of Poe's most violent short stories. Poe was following the popular tradition of Gothic fiction, a genre employed by American and British readers for several decades (Silverman, p. 111). Poe improved the genre of horror fiction by making his stories more sophisticated, dramatizing terror by using more realistic images (Meyers, p. 77).

The narrator slides into mental illness while the condition of *Berenice* deteriorates. This illness allows him to commit a cruel crime without being able to remember it. This is one of the few Poe stories where the narrator is identified by name; he is called Egaeus which may come from Aegeus, the legendary king of Athens.

After publishing *Berenice* the number of editions of the *Messenger* was increased and for some time every number contained a short story by Poe and a literary review or criticism. But still Poe was criticized for writing about such a subject and for trying to elicit a shock response from his readers. Contemporary readers were horrified by the story's violence and complained to the editor. Though Poe in 1840 published a self-censored version of the work he believed he should be judged solely by how many copies were sold.

7.2. Parallels to Poe's Life

What is most striking about this story, even at the beginning, is the numerous parallels to Poe's own life. The narrator begins the story by

telling the reader about his family and himself. He even introduces himself with his baptismal name which is very unusual in Poe stories. The surname of the family is not mentioned, he only relates that he belongs to a very rich and popular family. This is the first parallel to Poe's real life. He lived with the Allans; they were very rich and distinguished. Now he got to know a totally different world from the one he knew when he still lived with his mother. As the Allans were very rich they were an important part of the city and the population; they were well respected and their name was known throughout the country. To John Allan his antecedents and consequently also his surname, were very important; he was proud of his family.

Poe was never legally adopted, he never really belonged to the Allans. John Allan, although he tolerated Poe in his house, did not see him as his son and did not want him as his legal heir. This situation excluded Poe from the family and from the pride of Allan. It might have been very troublesome for Poe, and probably he felt unwelcome and alienated in this house. This problem continued; even when Poe was older and not living in the house of John Allan anymore, he was ignored whenever he asked for help or money. To Poe this must have felt as if John wanted to hide him from society, as if he did not want others to know he belonged to his family and bore his name. It may have felt as if John wished that Poe did not exist, as if he wanted to bury him although he was alive.

In the story the narrator also belongs to a rich and distinguished family. He describes how well established and important they were. They must have been known to the public and probably everyone knew their name. But Poe leaves out the name of the family; his narrator does not give away his surname. This points to the problematic relation between John Allan and Poe. It seems as if, by hiding the name of the family in his story, he tries to hurt John; he tries to take something off him that is very important to him. Poe knew that for John, name and derivation were everything and in leaving away the name, he sees his only chance of punishing or hurting John, and coping with his situation.

After that opening of the story Egaeus continues describing the room in which his whole life takes place, the library, and why this room is so important to him.

The recollections of my earliest years are connected with that chamber, and with its volumes – of which latter I will say no more. Here died my mother. Herein was I born. (p. 225)

Before Poe lived with the Allans he lived with his biological mother, Elizabeth. They were very poor and therefore could not afford a house of their own so they lived with an acquaintance, in one room at the back of the house. As his mother was very ill, she was often in bed in that room while her children, Edgar and Rosalie, were playing next to her. They spent most of the day in that single room. When Poe was only four years old his mother died in that room with young Poe probably even next to her. Their whole life until then had taken place in that one room; it certainly left a strong impression on Poe and influenced his writings, like here in this story.

Another parallel which reminds us of Poe's history is that the narrator's cousin is living in the house with him and they are preparing to marry. Poe himself was living with his aunt and her daughter, Virginia, who was Poe's cousin, in one house. At the time this story was published he was probably himself preparing for the wedding to his cousin, which might have influenced and occupied his mind a lot, as this story was published only six months before Poe and Virginia actually married. And just as in Poe's own life the narrator's cousin is incurably ill, which certainly did not make the situation easier for both Poe and the narrator of *Berenice*.

When Poe describes this decline of Berenice it also sounds like a grievance about his cousin's fate and consequently also his own.

Ah! vividly is her image before me now, as in the early days of her light-heartedness and joy! Oh! gorgeous yet fantastic beauty! Oh! Sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim! – Oh! Naiad among its fountains! – and then – then all is misery and terror, and a tale which should not be told. Disease – a fatal disease – fell like the simoom upon her frame, and even while I gaze upon her, the spirit of change swept over her ... (p. 226)

When Poe started to live with the Clemms, his cousin Virginia was still a child and healthy; she was vivacious and happy, enjoying her life. But some time later she showed the first signs of tuberculosis and all the people around had to watch her decline without being able to help her. She was not able to run around in the fields anymore, she became weak and fragile instead of lively and was often very sad. For Poe this was very hard to watch; he was frightened of losing yet another person he loved.

Another component of *Berenice* which also reflects Poe's life and his problems can be found in the narrator's fetish-like focus on detail. The narrator describes how his own disease grew worse and he developed some sort of monomania. This means that certain things that would seem unimportant and negligible to other people attracted the narrator's interest in an extreme way. He spent hours watching them and was totally concentrated on these things; they seemed to have some sort of power over him.

To muse for long unwearied hours with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin, or in the topography of a book; to become absorbed for the better of a summer's day, in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry, to lose myself for an entire night in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire; to dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower; to repeat monotonously some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind; to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence long and obstinately persevered in; (p. 227)

Egeus describes here how this focusing on certain marginal things slowly pushed him away from reality. He did not see the important things, like the day or the sun or a whole book anymore, he was lost in detail. Through this he abandoned the world and began to live in his own reality.

This blurred or displaced perception of the world is a typical sign of an opium addict. What Poe describes here can be traced back to his experience of opiate dreams. The reason this can be seen as a parallel to Poe's own life is that he was smoking a lot of opium, especially in those phases of his life when he had problems or periods of collapse overtook him.

The picture of the narrator also seems like a mirror image of Poe himself. The narrator is absorbed with his books and seems not to take part in the everyday life of the family. The chamber seems like a refuge to which he flees because he does not want to be confronted by the problems around him. Poe, just like the narrator, was also absorbed in his writing. Compared to his cousin Virginia he was very quiet and depressed. He tried to forget about reality by taking drugs and consuming a lot of alcohol.

These parallels to reality show how Poe might have been feeling at that time. He was living with his cousin whom he was about to marry. It was known that she was already suffering from tuberculosis and that her condition was getting worse. Poe certainly also knew about this and maybe felt as though he was being taken back to his childhood when his mother, whom he still lived with, was also very ill and about to die. This repeated confrontation with slowly approaching death seems to have troubled Poe a great deal as it can repeatedly be found in his stories. Here, in *Berenice*, he includes both situations in the story; the situation when he was living in the room in which his mother died and the situation when he was preparing to get married to his young cousin who was also going to die, as both represent death.

7.3. Safety Zones

Although the library Egaeus grew up in and lived in can certainly be seen as a reference to Poe's early childhood, there is still another resemblance to that situation to be found. The narrator describes that his whole life takes place in that one room and that he hardly ever goes out. There he feels at home, this is what he knows and where he feels safe.

The picture of a safety zone was described as the clinical picture of an agoraphobic. People who suffer from that illness are sometimes frightened of leaving the house or some other place where they feel safe. They fear that if they go out they might get into a situation where escape might become difficult or embarrassing and therefore, depending on the severity of the illness, they sometimes do not leave their safety zone at all. The

only contact they have with other people is when they invite them to where they feel safe and feel they have control over the situation.

What Poe describes here might have been a resemblance of his own feelings and experiences. The only place he may have felt safe was probably the room he shared with his mother, and later the rooms he shared with the Clemms. This can be seen as a hint to Poe's own psychological problems. As he, unintentionally but perfectly well, describes the clinical picture of agoraphobia, he probably knew about these feelings as he suffered from that illness himself.

7.4. Hints of Premature Interment

At the beginning of the story it is not quite clear what *Berenice* is going to be about, nor can the reader guess the topic from the title. The narrator talks about his family and himself but this does not tell us anything about the subject of the story. A few paragraphs later, when describing the illness of the narrator's cousin, Poe gives the first hint about his topic and makes the reader guess what *Berenice* is going to be about.

... a species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in *trance* itself – trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution, and from which her manner of recovery was, in most instances, startlingly abrupt. (p. 227)

The narrator talks about his cousin and her illness, he describes the symptoms and distinctive features of the disease. What is conspicuous to the reader is, when Egaeus describes that sometimes the state she is in, resembles death, and that the awakening can be very abrupt. This resemblance to death is a mirror image of the phenomenon of apparent death, which was widely discussed during the time Poe lived in. Physicians recognized that there were many different stages between life and death and that someone who appeared to be dead was not always unable to be reanimated. It was recognized that some illnesses only resembled the state of death but sometimes people recovered fully. This frightened people and it was widely discussed. Poe knew about these discussions and was himself also concerned as some of his relatives

suffered from diseases that were not well explored during his time. These experiences influenced his writing.

The reader now knows that Berenice suffers from an unidentified disease, which in some states resembles death. This makes the reader think that she will probably be buried alive. Poe joins his story to one of the biggest fears of his time.

The next hint of premature interment can be found in the titles of the books the narrator has collected in his library. One of those books, which occupies Egaeus in his state of monomania, is *de Carne Christi* by Tertullian. A sentence within the book which the narrator remembers perfectly is 'Mortuus est Dei filius; credibile est quia ineptum est; et sepultus resurrexit; certum est quia impossibile est.' (p. 228). This can be translated as: 'God's son has died; this is unbelievable as it is inapt; certain is what is impossible.'

The reason why the title of the book, cited by the narrator, is very important for the subject of this story, is that it is about Jesus. The sentence the narrator remembers so well describes what happened after Jesus was believed dead. Three days after his burial he was resurrected and left his tomb. This can be interpreted as one of the first reports of premature interment. The Christians themselves say that he came back from the dead, they even celebrate his resurrection on Easter Monday. The reason Poe chose this title for a book in the library might be that it gives another hint of what the story is about and what is going to happen. It is an omen and even the narrator himself recognizes it as such as he calls it a 'paradoxical sentence' and finds it necessary to mention that it occupied his mind. The reader can be absolutely sure what is going to happen.

Now that it is clear what is going to happen and the condition of Berenice continues to deteriorate, the narrator describes how Berenice looks, how she is already marked by the disease.

The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning

melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lusterless, and seemingly pupil-less, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, *the teeth* of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves to my view. [...] they were [...] long, narrow and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them,... (p. 230)

The way Egaeus describes the look of Berenice makes one think of death. It seems as if life has totally left her body and that all the parts of her body have withered. But there is one part left that does not resemble death: her teeth. They are beautiful and perfectly white and therefore can be seen as symbolizing life. This is again a parallel to apparent death. When a person is apparently dead it means that all the vital signs have been reduced to a minimum, and from a distance it is very hard to recognize that the person is still alive. Only very deep inside the body are there still some traces of life to be found.

The look of Berenice, which Poe has created in this story, seems like a mirror image of the state of apparent death. From the outside it is hard to recognize that Berenice is still alive. She is somewhat shrunken and seems faded but when she smiles there is still a sign of life to be found inside her. It is possible that Poe registered this look in his mother or Virginia, who both died of tuberculosis and may themselves have looked as though dead a short time before they died. It may have been this image that haunted Poe and made him use it in his stories repeatedly.

7.5.The Burial

The situation escalates when one evening the narrator is again sitting in his library, buried in meditation and thinking about Berenice's teeth. Then suddenly enters

‘... a servant maiden, all in tears, who told me that Berenice – was no more. She had been seized with epilepsy in the early morning, and now, at the closing in of the night, the grave was ready for its tenant, and all the preparations for the burial were completed.’ (p. 231)

The first striking words in this quote are 'was no more'. It is very conspicuous that it is not directly said that Berenice is dead. It seems as if the narrator is avoiding these words, either because he senses that Berenice is not really dead or because he at least hopes that it is not true.

The next striking part about this statement is that Berenice died only in the morning and will be buried in the evening of the same day. First of all this is unusual because the narrator explained at the beginning of the story that Berenice had epileptic fits which resemble the state of death and that she would then recover very abruptly. This makes the reader wonder why no one thinks about the possibility that Berenice is suffering from a fit and is not necessarily dead. People around her knew about her illness and its symptoms. So the reader rightly wonders why nobody considers this.

Apart from Berenice's illness and the symptoms it was at that time very common to keep a corpse for a few days until signs of decomposition were observed. This was a common method to make sure that the person was actually dead. People accepted this practice because putrefication was seen as the only certain sign of death and as they were extremely afraid of being buried alive and if there was no urgent reason to bury the deceased at the first opportunity they kept with this custom and preserved the body for about three days.

The fact that Egaeus does not keep to those precautions but wants to bury Berenice after a very short time of her supposed death, makes the reader wonder what has happened, and surmise that Berenice is still alive. Poe may have applied response intentionally to give the reader a hint about what has happened. By this method he creates a strange feeling within the reader who goes on to read the story with horror because now he is sure how the story will continue.

7.6. The Terrible Truth

After the burial of Berenice the narrator is again in his library. He swings between alertness and dreams which sometimes make him unable to remember what has happened previously. It is about midnight and he knows that something terrible has happened but he is not able to

remember what exactly it was. Then there is a light tap on the door and a servant enters the door.

He told of a wild cry disturbing the silence of the night – of the gathering together of the household – of a search in the direction of the sound; - and then his tones grew thrillingly distinct as he whispered me of a violated grave – of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing, still palpitating, *still alive!* (p. 232)

Finally, the terrible event all signs have been pointing at has come true: Berenice who has been buried is still alive. What is even worse is that she has been very badly injured. All her teeth have been extracted and as the narrator opens the small box on the table besides him he finds that he was the one who hurt her. The hours that are missing in his memory are the ones when he went to Berenice's grave and although he realized that she was still alive he extracted her teeth and did not help her out of the grave.

This scene has very often been interpreted, especially in relation to sexual terms (Kennedy, p. 79). But it can also be interpreted in terms of mental illness and premature burial. In premature burial it is very clear what has happened. Berenice was obviously not dead but had suffered one of her epileptic fits. What all the signs and actions have been pointing to has come true. To the reader it was already clear that premature interment was going to happen as there was very little time between her presumed death and burial and the description of Berenice's illness also pointed towards apparent death

In terms of mental illness this final scene is much more complex. The reader knows from the beginning that the narrator suffers from a mental illness as he himself describes it and even names it. He suffers from 'monomania', which makes him concentrate on negligible things, in this case Berenice's teeth. The reason he develops this illness is that his cousin who used to be very animated and healthy was becoming ill and he had to watch her decline. Consequently, his own disease also became worse which made him very lonely and he must have felt like being dead himself. In Berenice's teeth he saw the only thing that was not marked by death, the only thing that resembled life. Because of his mental state he concentrated on them and his mental state also allowed him to forget what

crime he had committed to acquire this symbol of life so that he does not have to feel as if he is apparently dead or buried alive.

7.7. Summary

It seems that *Berenice* is Poe's very personal story, influenced primarily by his own experiences and feelings. It starts when the narrator tells about his life. He comes from a very rich and distinguished family whose name he does not want to mention but he gives away his own name, which is very unusual for Poe's stories and therefore makes it much more personal.

Then the narrator goes on telling about himself and his cousin, whom he lives with, and whom he is going to marry. Egaeus himself is not a man who likes to go out or being in company. He spends his life in his library, devoted to his books and his writing. His cousin, Berenice, is just the opposite. She is animated, full of life and likes to go out and to be in company. These two characters very much resemble Poe himself and his cousin Virginia.

This resemblance becomes even greater when Berenice becomes incurably ill and the narrator's condition also starts to get worse; he begins to suffer from monomania. In Poe's life his cousin also became very ill and he knew that she would not recover. As a result he started drinking heavily, became depressed and took opium; the consumption of opium can lead to a mental state that strongly resembles that of monomania, described in the story.

Poe himself, just like the narrator, suffered from extreme mental problems, which in the story leads to a horrible ending; it gives the impression that the main influence for this story was his own life and his own problems. He does not refer to any historical facts or scientific developments which he so often does in his other stories. He seems to concentrate solely on his own history.

8. *The Cask of Amontillado*

8.1. Background

The Cask of Amontillado was first published in 1846 in *Godey's Lady's Book* which at that time was the most popular periodical in America (Reynolds, p. 101). At that time Poe was already popular and famous because of his poem *The Raven*. The story did then not cause such a sensation; it was just seen as yet another one of Poe's stories. Nowadays some critics argue that this story might have been a response to Thomas Dunn English and his novel *1844* (Silverman, pp. 312-313). In this novel Dunn mocks Poe, employing a character who is addicted to alcohol and famous for his poem *The Black Crow*, he even keeps saying 'Nevermore', an important word in Poe's poem *The Raven*. Poe included many references to this novel of Dunn in his story.

The mystery of this story lies in the motive for the murder. It is not known what Fortunato has done to deserve being buried alive. He is unreliable because he uses his subjective experience of Fortunato's insult to name himself judge, jury and executioner in this story. The unreliable narrator does not disclose his motives but only talks about 'the thousand injuries' and that he wants to punish without fear of retribution. The story features revenge and secret murder as a way of avoiding legal channels for retribution. Law is nowhere on Montresor's - or Poe's - mind, and the enduring horror of the story is punishment without proof.

The main theme is revenge but besides that there are also the themes of burial while still alive and mental illness. What is very unusual about this story and the premature burial is that here a person is buried alive intentionally. This is seldom the case; most of the time a fatal accident or a wrong diagnosis are the reason for a person being buried alive in Poe's stories.

A principal component of the story is irony. What has been demonstrated already is the name of the person who is buried alive:

Fortunato. The name is derived from the word 'fortunate', but this person is everything else but fortunate. Another significant thing is Fortunato's clothing: he wears a clown's or fool's costume. This is ironic because he is fooled by Montresor. There is even a lot of verbal irony to be found in the story. The narrator expresses his concern about Fortunato's health even though he intends to kill him. Another irony is that Montresor tells Fortunato that he is a 'mason', but he is not talking about the secret brotherhood as Fortunato thinks, but about the actual occupation. He means that he is a stonemason, and that he constructs things from stone and mortar, in this case Fortunato's grave.

8.2. The Motive

Although the narrator does not disclose his motive it can be suggested what drove him to enclose Fortunato in the vault. Shortly before they enter the vault Montresor 'warns' Fortunato not to go down, as it is dark and very damp, which is not healthy.

...; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. (p. 850)

The narrator tells us with this statement that once he had also been rich and respected but now he is not. This leads to the conclusion that something must have happened that made him lose his money and the respect of society. Probably Fortunato had been responsible for this social descent; maybe he has done something, whether intentionally or unintentionally, which caused this situation.

Montresor who was probably accustomed to prestige and abundance is now desperate about the situation he finds himself in. He does not belong to society anymore, people do not talk to him, they perhaps forgot about his existence. To him this situation maybe feels as if he is locked away, in a place from which there is no escape and he cannot return. He might have felt as if buried alive, he is still there but no one seems to realize it. This might be the reason why he thinks that Fortunato also deserves to be buried alive.

8.3. Mental Illness

The fact that Montresor is an unreliable narrator and does not disclose his motive allows the suggestion that the narrator suffers from mental illness. Apart from these indications he also shows no emotion when he interments Fortunato which can be a sign that he either does not fully understand his deed and its consequences, or that he does not care about it because he has no conscience. In any case it proves that something is wrong with his mind.

It is not clear whether this mental disturbance derives from the feeling of being buried alive or if his mental problems might be the reason that he is not respected and admired anymore. No matter what influenced the other, it is noticeable that, again, mental illness goes hand in hand with the theme of premature interment. This could either reflect the mental state of Poe himself or could have been just a way of creating tension.

8.4. Biographical Background

As in most of Poe's other stories there are many parallels to his own life to be found. Poe may have known bricklaying through personal experience. Many periods in Poe's life lack significant biographical details, including what he did after leaving the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837. Poe biographer John H. Ingram wrote to Sarah Helen Whitman that someone named 'Allen' said that Poe 'worked in the brickyard late in the fall of 1834'. This source has been identified as Robert T. P. Allen, a fellow West Point student during Poe's time there (Dwight and Jackson, p. 141). This experience may have helped him to write about the theme of premature interment as he probably even helped to build a vault and therefore knew a lot about them and what precautions against premature burial were included in them. It might have helped him to describe in great detail how the vault of Montresor looked and how he built the wall.

Another component of the story that can be related to Poe's life is the narrator's family motto 'Nemo me impune lacessit', which is also the

national motto of Scotland. The reason this can be seen as a reference to Poe's life is that John Allan, his foster father, had also been Scottish. Other hints about his foster father are that the narrator had been rich and respected which also applied to John Allan. Apart from that the narrator and John Allan have in common the fact that they were both interested in wines and both had to do with the masons, one with the brotherhood, the other with the profession. But even if Montresor was not a member of the brotherhood, the profession is still a hint about this secret society.

The reason Poe created Montresor as a reference to his foster father is probably that Poe himself knew the feeling of being buried alive. John Allan suppressed Edgar and sometimes even treated him as if he didn't exist. When Poe was still young Allan did not want to adopt Edgar legally as he was still hoping to have his own children. When Poe was older and asked Allan for money, he did not receive any because Allan now had a new family. Allan treated Poe like someone who was of no importance and not welcome. This could probably have produced in Poe the feeling of being invisible or buried alive. As a result he may have connected this feeling with his foster father and therefore used him as a model for the character of the narrator.

8.5. The Interment

The repeated allusions to the bones of Montresor's family which line the vaults foreshadow the story's descent into the underworld. The two men's underground travels are a metaphor for their trip to hell. Poe often employs foreshadowing to build suspense in the story. The reader soon knows what is going to happen to Fortunato but he can do nothing to prevent it which even increases the horror.

When they have reached the 'extremity of the niche' (p. 852) the terrible crime takes place, Montresor intentionally buries Fortunato alive. This situation is the more horrible as the narrator describes how desperate Fortunato is, how he begs for his life and how he slowly dies.

Fortunato had in great a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of

the recess. It was NOT the cry of a drunken man. [...] the noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labours and sat down upon the bones. [...] A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. [...] I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. (p. 853)

In this situation it becomes very clear how cold-blooded the narrator is. He hears the screams and begging but does not even feel remorse or anything like it; he is proud of what he has done. As Montresor is created as the mirror image of John Allan it is probable that Poe here describes how he sensed the cruelty of his foster father. Poe perceived the way Allan treated him as cruel and he felt that Allan wanted to hide him, to bury him socially so no one would know that he was Allan's foster child, or even alive.

8.6. Parallels with Modern Psychology

That the narrator is not punished for his crime, and the crime is not even detected for fifty years, mirrors the findings and theses of Benjamin Rush. Rush thought that crime should be seen less as a sin than as sickness and therefore he opposed capital punishment. Perhaps Poe liked this theory and as a result his narrator stays uncaught. This also fits the fact that Montresor does not use legal channels to punish Fortunato. The impression is created that this is not a concern for the police.

Perhaps this was a way for Poe to justify his feelings of wanting to bury John Allan or whatever other criminal thoughts he might have entertained. If a crime like this, or even a feeling like this, was not a sin but rather a sickness, it was not his fault what he felt, he was simply ill.

8.7. Summary

Although this story describes only a short period in time, there is still extreme horror created. The main source of horror is that the narrator does not give away his motive or what damage Fortunato has inflicted on Montresor. What creates even greater horror is the detailed description of

the interment scene and of the noises and screams produced by Fortunato during his death struggles.

That the narrator does not disclose his motive does not mean that there are no hints about it to be found within the story. One of these hints is that Fortunato is probably responsible for the narrator's social decline. This social decline probably led to Montresor feeling as though buried alive which in return made him want to bury his opponent while he was still alive.

This relationship mirrors the relation between Poe and his foster father John Allan. As Allan did not accept Poe and only ignored him, Poe felt unwelcome and was in a situation that probably felt like being buried alive. This might have been the principal reason why Poe again employed the theme of premature burial. He could have created another way to punish or kill Fortunato.

The fact that the crime is not detected, not even after fifty years, and that no legal channel is used to punish Fortunato reflects the new findings in psychiatry of Poe's time. Benjamin Rush argued that crime should not be seen as a sin which has to be punished but rather as a sickness that has to be treated and cured. Poe obviously seemed to like those as they probably excused his own feelings and thoughts.

Conclusion

In this work the theme in Poe's short stories of being buried alive has been analyzed in terms of the times he lived in, with special regard to medical developments of that time, psychological aspects and his own biographical background. But analysing the work of a poet with regard to his own life is always very problematic; one has to keep in mind that those stories are not autobiographical, and that the narrator in the stories is not the same person as the poet.

Poe's narrators are sometimes very cruel; they even seem evil, especially when they deliberately bury a person who is still alive. This does not mean that Poe himself was an evil man and that he wished to bury any person prematurely. It is not that easy to draw parallels between a poet and his work, and also not the purpose of an interpretation.

But it is commonly known that Poe had a really problematic life and that he suffered from various mental problems. Considering these mental problems, this work explores how Poe's life and his work resemble each other. As there are some parallels to be found, writing might have been a way for Poe to cope with his problems and experiences. Therefore his stories can be related to some of his own problems, but they are not a mirror image of his life.

This biographical background is certainly only a small aspect in the stories and therefore only a marginal reason why Poe so frequently employed the topic of premature interment. Other probable reasons the theme is employed are the medical background and the general scientific developments of Poe's times, as well as certain psychological phenomena that were explored throughout the work. Consequently it is not necessary to know Poe's biography to be able to read and appreciate the stories.

The work of Poe stands on its own; it is not dependent on the writer nor on his circumstances. To understand the plot and to enjoy Poe's stories it is not necessary to know about the author's problems nor his times; the stories are very entertaining and thrilling even from today's point of view.

They can be interpreted in many different ways and do not lose their topicality if they are analyzed without relating them to the 19th century.

But even though the stories are not dependent on the circumstances in which they were produced, it is still interesting to take them apart and appreciate them. It is fascinating to learn about the people of that age and to get to know how they might have reacted to these stories, and why they were so interested in this topic. In this context it is also interesting to find out why Poe himself was so obsessed with this theme that he chose exactly this from all the themes so prominent and debatable in his time; to understand all this and to interpret the stories according to this background it is important to know about Poe's history and the times he lived in. This opens another point of view on those stories, which is not necessary to understand them, but still very exciting and interesting to know.

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Appendix

Zusammenfassung

„Lebendig begraben“ ist in vielen Geschichten von Poe ein zentrales und häufig verwendetes Thema. Um die möglichen Gründe, warum dieses Thema so oft verwendet wurde, verstehen zu können, ist es notwendig, die Zeit zu verstehen, in der Poe lebte.

Das erste Kapitel handelt von den wissenschaftlichen Entwicklungen im 19. Jahrhundert, insbesondere von den medizinischen Fortschritten und den Zeitungsberichten zu den Themen „Scheintod“ und „Lebendig begraben“. Diese Zeit war von medizinischen Experimenten geprägt, und folglich wurden viele Fakten über den menschlichen Körper und über den Scheintod der breiten Öffentlichkeit zugänglich. Da dies allerdings ein frühes Stadium der Medizin war, und noch viele Fehler gemacht, sowie falsche Schlüsse gezogen wurden, kam es zu verschiedenen aber vor allem auch verwirrenden Theorien über Krankheiten und den menschlichen Körper allgemein. Dieses neue Wissen beeinflusste Poe sehr stark. Viele seiner Geschichten beginnen mit einer Person, die an einer unbekannten Krankheit leidet, und enden damit, dass jemand lebendig begraben wird.

Ein anderer wissenschaftlicher Zweig, den man zu erforschen begann, ist die Psychologie - auch ein Thema, das häufig in Poes Geschichten gefunden werden kann. Oft leidet eine Person an einer psychischen Krankheit, oder hat Angst davor, lebendig begraben zu werden. Das Krankheitsbild, das man heutzutage kennt, und das das Bild des Lebendig-Begraben-Seins am ehesten beschreibt, heißt Agoraphobie, was im nachfolgenden Kapitel beschrieben wird.

Poe selbst litt an verschiedenen psychischen Krankheiten, die nicht nur sein Leben, sondern vor allem auch sein Schreiben beeinflussten. Im letzten Kapitel des einleitenden Teils der Arbeit werden deshalb Poes Leben, sowie seine Probleme behandelt. Dieses Hintergrundwissen ist

notwendig, um verstehen zu können, warum das Thema ‚Lebendig begraben‘ in Poes Geschichten so oft zu finden ist.

Die erste Geschichte, die mit Bezug auf diesen Hintergrund analysiert wird, ist *The Premature Burial*. Hier werden spezifisch ‚echte‘ Fälle von frühzeitigen Begräbnissen geschildert; das bedeutet, dass sich Poe in dieser Geschichte vor allem mit der medizinischen Entwicklung des 19ten Jahrhunderts beschäftigt. Da während dieser Zeit sehr viele Berichte über Zwischenstufen vom Leben zum Tod, vor allem über den Scheintod und das daraus resultierende Lebendig-Begraben-Werden, zu finden waren, war die Bevölkerung stark verunsichert, was wiederum das große Interesse an diesem Thema erklärt. Im zweiten Teil dieser Kurzgeschichte berichtet der Erzähler von seiner eigenen Krankheit, und von den Vorkehrungen, die er getroffen hat, um dem Lebendig-Begraben-Werden zu entgehen. Das reflektiert die Konsequenzen, die diese Berichte hatten: viele Erfinder beschäftigten sich mit der Konstruktion von sogenannten Sicherheitssärgen und Gräften, aus denen es möglich war, sich selbst zu befreien.

Die nächste Geschichte, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, ist bekannt für die Verbindungen und Hinweise, die jedes einzelne Element mit den anderen Elementen und Personen verbinden. Hier findet man sehr viele Symbole, die alle auf das Thema ‚Lebendig Begraben‘ hinweisen, aber auch viele psychologische Aspekte. Das lässt sich durch den großen Fortschritt, der gerade im Bereich der Psychologie stattfand, erklären; es können aber auch viele Hinweise auf Poes eigene Probleme gefunden werden. Diese Geschichte ist also sowohl vom Fortschritt der damaligen Zeit, als auch von Poes eigenen Problemen und Erfahrungen beeinflusst.

In *The Pit and the Pendulum* geht es um eine Geschichte, die auf symbolische Weise den Vorfall eines Scheintodes und des darauf folgenden Lebendig-Begraben Werdens widerspiegelt. Poe beschreibt hier sehr detailliert die Gefühle, die, nach Meinung der Bevölkerung des 19. Jahrhunderts, jemand hatte, der lebendig begraben in einem Grab aufwachte. Die Situation des Erzählers kann mit der eines Scheintoten verglichen werden, der im Grab aufwacht; die Spanische Inquisition steht

daher für eine tödliche, unbekannte oder noch unerforschte Krankheit, woran damals viele Menschen starben.

Die nächste Geschichte, *Berenice*, beschäftigt sich weniger mit den damals aktuellen medizinischen Entwicklungen; dafür können sehr viele Parallelen zu Poes eigenem Leben gefunden werden. Zum Beispiel lebt der Erzähler in einem Haus mit seiner jungen lebenslustigen Cousine, die er heiraten soll. Poe selbst wohnte auch sehr lange bei seiner Tante und seiner Cousine, die er heiratete, als sie erst dreizehn Jahre alt war. Es lassen sich in dieser Geschichte aber auch viele psychologische Aspekte finden. Der Erzähler beschreibt, dass er sein ganzes Leben in einer Bibliothek verbringt, wo er sich sicher und wohl fühlt. Das kann als Symptom für Agoraphobie gesehen werden. Menschen, die an dieser Krankheit leiden, verlassen oft ihr Zuhause nicht mehr, da es der einzige Ort ist, an dem sie sich sicher fühlen.

Die letzte Geschichte, *The Cask of Amontillado*, ist eine von den späteren Geschichten Poes. Sie ist eher untypisch, da hier eine Mensch absichtlich lebendig begraben wird. Im Allgemeinen ist diese Geschichte sehr brutal. Poe schildert sehr genau wie der Erzähler seinen ‚Freund‘ in den Untergrund lockt und ihn schließlich einmauert. Dabei konzentriert er sich besonders auf die Hilfeschreie und Geräusche, die dieser dabei von sich gibt, was das ganze sehr real und auch brutal erscheinen lässt. Diese Geschichte kann als psychologische Aufarbeitung seiner Kindheit gesehen werden, da man in der Person des Erzählers viele Parallelen zu Poes Adoptivvater, John Allan, findet.

Geschichten anhand des Lebens des Autors zu analysieren kann sehr problematisch sein, da man immer bedenken muss, dass die Geschichten nicht autobiographisch sind, und der Erzähler und der Autor nicht die gleiche Person sind. Da Poe aber ein sehr problematisches Leben hatte, und wahrscheinlich viele seiner Erfahrungen und Probleme in seinen Werken verarbeitet hat, kann man versuchen einige Parallelen zu finde. Zusammen mit den medizinischen Entwicklungen der damaligen Zeit, sowie dem psychologischen Aspekt, ergibt sich ein Gesamtbild von den

Gründen, die Poe beeinflusst haben könnten, dieses Thema so häufig in seinen Geschichten zu verwenden.

Curriculum Vitae

12 March 1982:	born in Eisenstadt
1988 – 1992:	„Volksschule St. Andrä/Zicksee“
1992 – 1996:	„BG und BRG Neusiedl am See“
1996 – 2000:	„Theresianum Eisenstadt“
1 June 2000:	Matura
2000 – 2001:	„Anlistik / Spanisch“ at the „Universität Wien“
2001 – 2008:	„Lehramtsstudium Englisch / Geschichte, Sozialkunde, Politische Bildung“ at the „Universität Wien“