The Faith, Innovation, & Mystery of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)
Fall 2018 Reading Packet Session 3: Nov. 19, 6:30-8 p.m. repeated Nov. 20, 9:30-11 a.m.

What I here propose is true: — therefore it cannot die: — or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will 'rise again to the Life Everlasting.” —Poe, Eureka (1848)

Session 3 Readings

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Reading 1. Poe’s Postal Stamp and Biography (1827-1849)

A. January 16, 2009. [Pictured above.] The U.S. Postal Service celebrated the 200th anniversary of Edgar Allan Poe by unveiling a commemorative Poe stamp in Richmond VA. Speakers included Poe Museum President Dr. Harry Lee Poe, whose great, great grandfather was Poe’s cousin Nielson. Pictured is the stamp sheet. Poe’s portrait was painted in oils on a salvaged wooden panel by French-born British illustrator Edmund Dulac (1882-1953). The stamp sheet bears this quotation from narrator of The Raven (verse 17), who commands that the Raven: “Leave my loneliness unbroken.”

B. Move to Baltimore. In 1827, after feuding with Allan, who refused to pay Poe’s gambling debts (incurred because Allan gave him insufficient funds for his life and lodging at the University of Virginia), Poe left the University and moved to Baltimore. He resided with his aunt, Maria Clemm, and her young daughter, Virginia.

Mrs. Maria Poe Clemm (1790-1871). At age 27 Maria became the 2nd wife of Baltimore hardware merchant William Clemm and step-mother to his children. William and Maria also had 3 children, including the youngest (Virginia), who would become Poe’s wife.

Described by acquaintances as a “rather ordinary, uncultivated woman” with an “almost masculine aspect” Maria (called “Muddy” by Poe and Virginia) was devoted to them. She kept the house clean and neat, cooked the meals, and served as Poe’s messenger, running errands and negotiating with the poet and his publishers. Her devotion to Poe is clear.

When when she heard rumors about Poe’s death, she wrote her nephew Nielson: “I have heard this moment of the death of my dear son Edgar—I cannot believe it, and have written to you, to try and ascertain the fact and particulars—he has been at the South for the last three months, and was on his way home—the paper states he died in Baltimore yesterday—If it is true God have mercy on me, for he was the last I had to cling to and love, will you write the instant you receive this and relieve this dreadful uncertainty—My mind is prepared to hear all—conceal nothing from me.” After Poe’s death, Maria was left without any source of income. She survived largely from the generosity of Poe’s friends and admirers. Among those who sent her small sums were Henry W. Longfellow and Charles Dickens.

C. Poe enlists in the U.S. Army. publishes his 1st book of verse & grieves the death of his foster mother. In May 1827, in order to support himself and the Clemm family, Poe enlisted in the U.S. Army under the name Edgar A. Perry. Poe served at Fort Moultrie, Sullivan’s Island (Charleston SC) and at Fort Monroe in Virginia. In January 1829, he was promoted Sergeant-Major of the Regiment of Artillery. Hearing of his foster mother’s illness. Poe frequently wrote his uninterested foster-father, requesting information on Frances’s health, but received no answer. It’s difficult to know what Poe knew about his foster mother’s health. Somehow he learned that Frances had died and was granted leave, he arrived the day after her funeral (March 1, 1829).

Also in 1827, a Boston publisher accepted Poe’s first book of verse: Tamerlane, and Other Poems. The small pamphlet was heavily influenced by his then- idol English poet Lord Byron. Poe published the volume anonymously, identifying himself only as “A Bostonian.” Approximately 50 were sold. [Note: After Poe’s death, his biographer Rufus Griswold said that there was no evidence of such a publication and the Poe’s claim demonstrated his “lying nature.” The Griswold position was generally accepted until 1880 when a British scholar found a copy in the library of the British Museum.]

D. Poe reassigned to West Point and publishes his 2nd Book of Verse. Poe served two years of a five-year enlistment before the Army gave him leave (April 15, 1829) so that he could begin a year-long effort to be reassigned to West Point. On leave, he put the finishing touches on his 2nd publication, Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Other Poems (1829). For once, his foster father agreed to help him and, using his contacts, accomplished the reassignment. Poe began his studies at the Military Academy on July 1, 1830.
Although Poe thrived academically at West Point, he felt isolated and useless. He struggled with financial problems because Allan refused to assist him. To obtain his release from the Army, Poe was required to pay for a substitute to take his place and, thus, to “reimburse” the Army. Poe’s solution was to stop attending classes and to boycott the required chapel attendance. For these infringements, he was court-martialed and expelled on March 6, 1831.

**E. Poe returns to Baltimore, begins publishing Short Fiction; his brother Henry dies.** Poe returned to the Clemm household in Baltimore where his brother Henry was also living. Realizing that short fiction was becoming a popular feature in periodicals, Poe began writing short stories and, in July 1831, submitted one to a contest sponsored by the Philadelphia Saturday Courier. He did not win first prize, but the Courier did publish 5 of his stories without his name. His brother Henry died in June, 1831.

**F. Allan never reconciles with Poe & leaves him nothing in his Will.** The Poe and John Allan relationship became even more complicated when John remarried in October 1830. The new Mrs. Allan (Louisa Patterson) had no use for Poe. When Poe was court-martialed, Allan disowned his foster son even though Poe made serious and sincere efforts toward reconciliation. When Allan died in 1834, he left his wealth to his new wife and to their 3 sons.

**G. Move to Richmond (1835-1837).** In 1835, Poe, Maria and the Clemms moved back to Richmond. Delighted to return, Poe reminisced with old friends about the happy times of his childhood, particularly reading adventure tales like Robinson Crusoe: “How fondly do we [remember] ...those enchanted days of our boyhood when we first learned to grow serious over Robinson Crusoe!—when we first found the spirit of wild adventure...Alas the days of desolate islands are no more” (Poe, 1837!)

**H. Poe and the Southern Literary Messenger (1835-1837).** In the early 19th C., literary magazines published in the North (like Harper’s) set the tone for American literary discussions. To capitalize on the untapped market of southern readers, editors attempted to establish similar journals in the South. Most failed quickly because southern readers preferred the better-established northern magazines.

However, during the 2 years (1835-1837) Poe was associated with the Messenger, its circulation increased from 700 to 3,500 and it became the most important literary periodical in the South. Always controversial and irrepressibly frank, Poe became most respected and hated of literary critics. Thanks to Poe, the journal improved in quality, greatly increased circulation (from 700 to 3,500), and developed connections with the northern literary establishment.

Poe, the 1st Science Fiction Story, and Jules Verne (Pictured on the left). In 1835, Poe published The Unparalleled Adventure of Hans Pfaall in the Messenger. The story was offered as a true, quasi-scientific account of the journey of Pfaall (note the pun in his last name) to the moon and back in a balloon of his own construction. Of course, Poe’s hoax was unmasked; but people still enjoyed the story. Poe created an even more popular balloon hoax story when he moved to New York in 1844.

Frenchman Jules Verne (1828-1905) eventually read both stories and decided to write a similar adventure story: Five Weeks in a Balloon (1863). The story was extremely popular, and, from the profits, he earned sufficient financial independence to become a full-time writer and to produce A Journey to the Center of the Earth and Around the World in Eighty Days. Verne considered Poe a genius and fully credited him as his major influence.

**1. Success at the Messenger; Poe and Virginia Marry.** The year 1836 was a good one for the 26-year-old Poe. He was appointed literary editor and, eventually, editor of the Messenger. He as also fond of his young cousin Virginia Clemm and had been considering asking Virginia to marry him. When Virginia received an invitation to visit her wealthy (single) cousin Neilson in Baltimore. Poe decided to move quickly.

He received Maria’s blessing, and he and Virginia had a Presbyterian wedding ceremony at their Richmond boarding house. [A witness falsely attested to Clemm’s age as 21.] According to his contemporaries, Poe, who had felt alone in the world since the early death of his parents, was devoted to Virginia. He took charge of her education, personally tutoring her in the classics and mathematics. She excelled in singing and piano and had a beautiful voice.

They never had any children and never alluded to anything sexual in their letters. They slept separately for many years. Biographers state that the two were devoted to one another, but were more like a brother and sister than husband and wife. You’ll find a Valentine poem from Virginia to Edgar in our readings as well as a letter describing Poe’s despair at her death.

**J. Poe leaves Richmond & moves to New York to find more time for his writing (1838-39).** Poe was spending long hours reviewing manuscripts, responding to authors, writing reviews, and responding to correspondence. Determined to give more time to his own writing, he and his family left Richmond to settle in the North. However, Poe continued to publish material in the Messenger until his death. [The Messenger, the only prominent Southern literary journal, ceased publication in 1864, just before the beginning of the Civil War.]
While in New York City in 1838, Poe published a long prose narrative The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, the story of a whaling vessel stowaway who finds himself in the middle of mutiny, shipwreck, and cannibals. Filled with factual and grotesque material, the novel is considered an inspiration for Herman Melville’s Moby Dick.


L. Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1839). Thanks to the popularity of The House of Usher, Poe found a publisher for his 2-volume collection of 25 short stories; it included House of Usher and Ligeia. Poe had read “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition,” an essay by British novelist Sir Walter Scott. In the essay, Scott discussed Islamic art and the concepts of the “grotesque” and “arabesque” as part of the Gothic tradition. Thus, Poe chose that title for his collection.

You’ll find a summary and quotations for The Fall of the House of Usher later in this packet. As you read that material, consider how these varying definitions of grotesque apply: strange, mysterious, magnificent, fantastic, hideous, and ugly. An arabesque is an ornamental design consisting of intertwined flowing lines; it appears in Arabic or Moorish decorations and is often a characteristic of the patterns in a Mosque.

Without doubt, Roderick Usher and his sister are “intertwined” with one another, their heritage, and the house itself. The same is true of Ligeia in which the narrator’s unusually beautiful and brilliant bride Ligeia may or may not have come back to life in Rowena, the narrator’s 2nd wife, who dies as well. If you want to read a short summary and analysis of Ligeia, here’s an articulate one:


M. Murders in the Rue Morgue. Poe resigned from Burton’s in June 1840, but agreed the next year (1841) to edit its successor, Graham’s Magazine. That year, he published the first detective story: Murders in the Rue Morgue. The tale’s hero is the Frenchman C. Auguste Dupin, who appears in several of Poe’s self-named “tales of ratiocination” in which Dupin reaches solutions through an exact process of thinking and reasoning.

[Doyle is pictured on the left]) British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930 was fascinated by Poe’s Dupin and used him as the model for his famous sleuth Sherlock Holmes. Said Doyle of Poe: “Poe, who, in his carelessly prodigal fashion, threw out the seeds from which so many of our present forms of literature have sprung. He was the father of the detective tale and covered its limits so completely that I fail to see how his followers can find any fresh ground...On this narrow path the writer must walk, and he sees the footmarks of Poe always in front of him.”]

N. First Indication of Virginia Poe’s Illness. In January 1842, while singing and playing the piano in Philadelphia, Virginia began to bleed from her mouth. Poe at first thought it was “a ruptured blood-vessel.” In mid-1842, her condition worsened, and she was diagnosed as having tuberculosis. However, she had periods of remission and, to ease Poe who was distraught about her illness, she gardened and sang to him when she was able.

In May 1842, Poe resigned from the editorship of Graham’s Magazine. He is replaced by Rufus W. Griswold, who would become Poe’s arch-enemy. In a letter to a colleague, Poe explains that he was “disgusted with the namby-pamby character of the Magazine — a character which it was impossible to eradicate — I allude to the contemptible pictures, fashion plates, music and love tales.”

O. Important Poe Publications in 1843. Poe published The Pit and the Pendulum in an annual literary Christmas gift volume. In the tale, a Christian prisoner (possibly a Jewish convert) of the Spanish Inquisition describes his terror and his torture. A summary with quotations is included later in this packet.

In 1843, Poe delivered the first of his lectures on American Poetry, beginning in Philadelphia. A huge audience filled the hall, and reviews were generally favorable, inspiring Poe to proceed with other performances of the lecture. (Among Poe’s later lectures are “The Poets and Poetry of America,” “The Poetic Principle” and “The Universe.” The last of these became the basis for his 1848 book Eureka.) Poe’s tale The Gold Bug also won a $100 prize from the Philadelphia Dollar Newspaper. The tale drew such a large number of readers that the newspaper put out a 2nd edition. Poe gained national attention. A theatrical production based on the tale was performed on August 8, 1843 at the American Theatre in Philadelphia.

P. Return to New York (1844-1846). Poe and his family move to New York, and Poe creates what is known as “The Great Balloon Hoax.” On April 13, 1844, a special extra of the New York Sun carried
this headline: ASTOUNDING NEWS! ... THE ATLANTIC CROSSED IN THREE DAYS! SIGNAL TRIUMPH OF MR. MONCK MASON’S FLYING MACHINE!!!” According to the article, a balloon heading from England toward Paris was blown off-course and landed safely near Charleston SC.

Poe wrote the quasi-scientific “report” which, for a short time, was believed, causing a sensation. When the hoax was revealed, Poe was celebrated. He soon became an editor of the New York Mirror under the general editorship of Nathaniel Parker Willis, who became not only Poe’s lifelong friend, but also provided Poe’s family financial assistance to Poe and his family. On the occasion of Poe’s death, Willis praised Poe’s punctuality, industriousness, willingness to work long hours, and remarkable talent.

Q. The Raven and Other Publications. When The Raven appeared in the New York Mirror on January 29, 1845, the poem made Poe famous. He seized the opportunity to become editor and, eventually, owner of the struggling Broadway Journal. To stimulate Journal readership, he republished most of his short stories and poems. Unfortunately, financial problems forced the Journal’s foreclosure in January 1846. In 1846, Poe published The Philosophy of Composition, which is considered the first major piece of American literary criticism. You’ll find a summary in the 1st (September) Poe packet. Godey’s Lady’s Book began publishing the 1st of 5 installments of Poe’s “The Literati of New York City.”

R. Move to Fordham NY (1846-1849). In May 1846, Poe and his family moved via steamboat and carriage to a cottage in Fordham (now part of the Bronx) where he hoped Virginia would begin to heal. Poe’s landlord was a relative of Poe’s foster mother Frances, whose birth name was Valentine. When Virginia was able, she gardened, played the piano and harp, and encouraged Poe not to lose hope. As her condition wavered back and forth between near death and momentary hope, Poe became distraught. He wrote to a friend: “Each time I felt all the agonies of her death — and at each accession of the disorder I loved her more dearly & clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I am constitutionally sensitive — nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.” Poe also started drinking.

After 5 years of suffering and 11 years of marriage to the man she idolized, 25-year-old Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe died on January 30, 1847. Because Poe could not afford a burial site, she was entombed on February 2 in the Valentine family vault in the Dutch Reformed Church in Fordham. When Poe died, her bones were reburied in Baltimore’s Westminster Burial Ground. However, it was not until 1885 on the 76th anniversary of Poe’s birth, that she was reburied by his side.

S. Publication of Eureka. In 1848, Poe’s prose poem Eureka is published. Critical responses are mixed; some heap praise on the achievement; others denounce it as pantheistic. The publishers print only 500/1848 (about July 15) - Poe’s prose poem Eureka is published by George Putnam. Sales re insufficient to justify Poe’s much-hoped-for second edition.

T. Engagement to Childhood Sweetheart Elmira. While in Richmond (July 1849) on a southern lecture tour to raise money for his proposed magazine, The Stylus, Poe met with the widowed Elmira Royster Shelton. You may recall from our 1st Poe session that when Poe was young he and Elmira became secretly engaged. When her father learned, he quickly married her off to someone else while Poe was at the University of Virginia.

Rekindling their youthful romance, Poe asked Elmira to marry him. She was initially hesitant since by remarrying, she and her children would forfeit a large portion of her departed husband’s wealth due to a stipulation he placed in his Will. In August she accepted his proposal. Poe wrote his aunt (and former mother-in-law) Maria Clemm: “I think Elmira loves me more devotedly than anyone I ever knew & I cannot help loving her in return.” Poe also joined the Sons of Temperance: a society that required its members to abstain completely from drinking an alcoholic beverage.

U. The Mystery Surrounding Poe’s Disappearance and Death. On September 27, Poe left Richmond aboard the Steamship Pocahontas. He was bound for Philadelphia to edit a collection of poems for Mrs. St. Leon Loud, a minor figure in American poetry. Then he planned to go on to New York to meet Maria Clemm and escort her back to Richmond for his impending weddig. He never arrived in either place.

Fire days after Poe was due in Philadelphia, a newspaper man (Walker) found a delirious Poe in soiled clothes that were not his own behind the Swan Tavern. No one had heard or seen Poe since his departure from Richmond. Walker discovered Poe’s identification and finally found summoned help.

When admitted, some said Poe smelled of alcohol; however, his attending physician Dr. John J. Moran found no evidence of alcohol in his system. For 4 days until his death on October 7, Poe suffered from hallucinations, but never regained full consciousness. Poe repeatedly called out the name “Reynolds,” but—to this day, this figure remains a mystery. According to Dr. Moran, Poe spoke the following words just before he died: “Lord, help my poor soul.”

V. Cause of Death, Funeral, and Griswold’s “last word.” Poe’s death was diagnosed as phrenitis (a swelling of the brain). However, no one knows the cause. Speculations include murder by ruffians or hired assassins, cholera, rabies, a brain lesion, syphilis influenza, cholera, and encephalitis. After a small funeral on October 8, Poe

Poe-Sess. 3, OCT. 22-23, 2018-St. Richard’s Episcopal Church, Winter Park-Designer-facilitator Pamela Menke
was buried in an unmarked grave (part of his grandfather’s lot) in the Westminster Burying Ground with Poe cousin, Methodist minister Reverend William T. D. Clemm. On October 9, Rufus Wilmot Griswold’s slanderous obituary of Poe was published in the New York Tribune. Even though Griswold despised Poe and painted an inaccurate, libelous portrait of him, Griswold’s false claims persist.

U. The Baltimore Poe Grave Site. In 1875, a handsome Poe monument was installed on Poe’s grave in the Westminster Burying Ground, Baltimore. Those who attended the monument’s dedication included Judge Neilson Poe (Edgar’s cousin) and Walt Whitman (the great American poet, who actually met Poe once). On her death, Maria Clemm was also buried there. In 1885, the remains of Virginia Poe, buried in 1847 in New York, were brought to Baltimore and added to those of Edgar and Maria Clemm. Thus the three who had struggled together as a family for so many years were reunited for eternity.

Reading 2. Virginia’s Valentine Poem and Edgar’s Related Correspondence
Source: The National Park Service, Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site, Richmond.

In 1842, Virginia became ill with tuberculosis. On Valentine’s Day in 1846, Virginia wrote this acrostic poem to her husband. The first letter of each line spells out his name. You’ll also find Poe’s loving letter to her as well as a letter to a friend describing his despair

Reading 2. Virginia’s 1846 Valentine to her Husband and Selections from Correspondence

Every with thee I wish to roam—
Dearest my life is thine.
Give me a cottage for my home
And a rich old cypress vine,
Removed from the world with its sin and care
And the tattling of many tongues.
Love alone shall guide us when we are there—
Love shall heal my weakened lungs;
And Oh, the tranquil hours we’ll spend,
Never wishing that others may see!
Perfect ease we’ll enjoy, without thinking to lend
Ourselves to the world and its glee—
Ever peaceful and blissful we’ll be.

Edgar to Virginia, New York City, June 12, 1846. My Little Darling Wife: My Dear Heart, My dear Virginia! Our Mother will explain to you why I stay away from you this night. I trust the interview I am promised, will result in some substantial good for me, for your dearest sake, and hers—Keep up your heart in all hopefulness...In my last great disappointment, I should have lost my courage but for you—my little darling wife you are my greatest and only stimulus now. To battle with this uncongenial, unsatisfactory and ungrateful life—I shall be with you tomorrow P.M. and be assured until I see you, I will keep in loving remembrance your last words and your fervent prayer! Sleep well and may God grant you a peaceful summer, with your devoted Edgar

Poe’s letter to George Eveleth, January 4, 1848. Six years ago, a wife, whom I loved as no man ever loved before, ruptured a blood-vessel...Her life was despaired of. I took leave of her forever & underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially and I again hoped. At the end of a year the vessel broke again—I went through precisely the same scene. Again in about a year afterward. Then again—again—again...Each time I felt all the agonies of her death—and and I loved her more dearly & clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity...I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank....of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity. I had indeed, nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure when I found one in the death of my wife. This I can & do endure as becomes a man....In the death of what was my life, then, I receive a new but—oh God! How melancholy an existence.”

[Note: To save space, I’ve written each verse in a paragraph form. The dashes (--) indicate a new line in the verse. Unfamiliar words are marked in bold; a definition is provided below the stanza in which the word occurs.] If you’d prefer to read the poem as Poe write it, here’s the link:

Poetry Foundation: [https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48628/israfel](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48628/israfel)

### A. The Poem: *Israfel* (1831)

*And the angel Israfel, whose heart-strings are a lute, and who has the sweetest voice of all God’s creatures. —Quran (Koran)*

1. In Heaven a spirit doth dwell—"Whose heart-strings are a lute";--None sing so wildly well--As the angel Israfel,--And the giddy stars (so legends tell), --Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell--Of his voice, all mute.

2. Tottering above--In her highest noon,--The enamored moon--Blushes with love, -- While, to listen, the red Levin --- (With the rapid Pleiads, even, --Which were seven)--Pauses in Heaven.

   [Definition: Levin: an archaic word for lighting; Definition: Pleiads: In Greek mythology, the Pleiads were the 7 daughters of Atlas, a Titan who held up the sky, and the sea nymph Pleione, protector of sailing. To most people’s unaided eyes, the cluster looks like a tiny misty dipper of six little stars. Even so, the Pleiades is sometimes called the Seven Sisters. People with exceptional vision see seven, eight or more stars in the Pleiades with the unaided eye. These stars are thought to be hundreds of times more luminous than our sun.]

3. And they say (the starry choir --And the other listening things)--That Israeli’s fire--Is owing to that lyre--By which he sits and sings--The trembling living wire-- Of those unusual strings.

   [Definition: Lyre: Stringed instrument like a small U-shaped harp. Israeli: An alternate spelling of Israfel; also the name of the trumpet Israfel blows on Judgment. Day.]

4. But the skies that angel trod.--Where deep thoughts are a duty,--here Love’s a grown-up God, --Where the Houri glances are--Imbued with all the beauty--Which we worship in a star.

   [Definition: Houri: Beings in Islamic mythology as splendid companions of equal age with lovely eyes and modest gaze--virgins who will accompany the faithful in Jannah (Muslim paradise).]

5. Therefore, thou art not wrong, --Irsafeli, who despises--An unimpassioned song;--To thee the laurels belong, -- Best bard, because the wisest! --Merrily live, and long!

   [Definition: Laurels: Foliage of the bay tree woven into a wreath or crown and worn on the head as an emblem of victory.]

6. The ecstasies above--With thy burning measures suit--Thy grief, thy joy, thy hate, thy love, -- With the fervor of thy lute--Well may the stars be mute!

7. Yes, Heaven is thine; but this-- Is a world of sweets and sours;--Our flowers are merely--flowers;--And the shadow of thy perfect bliss--Is the sunshine of ours.

8. If I could dwell--Where Israfel--Hath dwelt, and he where I,--He might not sing so wildly well--A mortal melody,--While a bolder note than this might swell--From my lyre within the sky.

   [Pictured Above Left: Israfel, Dugald S. Walker’s Illustration for poet Sara Teasdale’s *Rainbow Gold: Poems Old and New for Boys and Girls*, 1922.]

### B. *Israfel, the Burning One*: Summary and Comment

Poe wrote *Israfel* while at West Point. *Israfel* (English translation: *the Burning One*) is the angel who will announce Armageddon by blowing his trumpet from a holy rock in Jerusalem. Though unnamed in the Quran, Israfel is one of the 4 Islamic archangels. It is said that *Israfel’s heart is a lute and that he has “the sweetest voice of all God’s creatures.”*
Until verse 8, the poem focuses on the effects of Israfel’s incredible music. When Israfel sings and plays his lute, everything pauses to listen and adore. The stars and moon become mute and stare down in love. The weather (red lightning) stops and listens. When Israfel walks around Heaven, the Muslim virgins (Hour) stare at him as if he were a glittering star. All of Heaven is entranced by Israfel’s ability to express vibrant emotions: “Thy grief, thy joy, thy hate, thy love.”

At first, it does not seem possible that a human poet could come close to creating Israfel’s glorious music and song. Israfel has Heaven after all, and, according to the poem, our “most perfect sunshine bliss” is nothing more than a shadow of Israfel’s joy. But then we read the final verse: If I could dwell--Where Israfel--Hath dwelt, and he where I,--He might not sing so wildly well--A mortal melody,--While a bolder note than this might swell--From my lyre within the sky.

In Verse 8, Poe declares his God-given mission as a poet: to immerse himself in the mix of “sweets andsours” and to explore the breadth and depth of human emotions. He is dedicating to becoming a mortal Israfel. As Poe scholar A. H. Quinn points out, this poem is “the utterance of a proud spirit, unawed even by the power of the lyre of Israfel,” willing to match his own voice with the angelic choir. For Poe was listening to an inner harmony, which the outer pain and sorrow of his outer life could disturb, but could not weaken (Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography., 1941).

The closing lines ask a question. What would happen if this poem’s creator (Poe) could trade places with the angel Israfel? The final lines answer. It is likely that the mortal poet (Poe) would surpass the mortal Israfel. It is also likely that the angelic singer (Poe) would surpass the angelic Israfel. First, the mortal Israfel might not be able to sing so “wildly” or “well” a human melody. The implicit message is that Poe, who embraces the “sweets andsours” of humanity’s imperfection, would sing such a powerful “song” that all of heaven and all of nature would be stunned by its truth, beauty, and purity.

Israfel Sources: Earthsky.org/space/myth; Wikipedia; cummingsstudyguides.net; megalomaniac.wordpress.com; poetryfoundation.org.

Reading 4. Poe, Fall of the House of Usher (1839)

Epigraph: *His her heart is a poised lute as soon as it is touched, it resounds.

--The Refusal by Pierre Jean de Beranger (1780-1857), poet, songwriter, & philosopher
(In French: Son coeur est un luth suspendu; Sittot qu’on le touche il resonne.)

Final verse of The Refusal, Poe’s Change, and brief bio of Beranger
[To save space, dashes signal a new line in the poem.]

• Final Verse: Keep your pelf; I’m no hero, I fear,--But it the world happens to hear--Of this secret you think so profound,--You’ll know whence the story has spring---My heart’s like a lyre newly strung,--One touch, and you make it resound!

[Define. Pelf: Money or honors, especially when gained in a dishonest or dishonorable way.]

• Poe’s Change: Poe changes Beranger’s first-person My Heart [Mon Coeur] to third person His- Her Heart (Son Coeur). The change is an important one. We’ll explore more of that in the Commentary that follows this summary.

• Beranger. Beranger’s songs gave impetus to the French (July) revolution of 1830. With Lafitte and Lafayette, he played a major role in placing Louis Phillippe on the throne, but he refused all the appointments offered him because he was committed to preserving his person independence.

Summary with Quotations: The Fall of the House of Usher
[Quotations are in bold type with quotation marks.]

U- Tube Link to Animated Version Read by Christopher Lee, 15 Min.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pic4PS8o41M

On a dark and gloomy autumn day, the tale’s narrator approaches the House of Usher, the sight of which renders the day even gloomier than before. He notes the house’s “eye-like windows” and feels a “depression of soul comparable only to the way an opium addict feels when he comes back to reality.” He can’t figure out why he feels so depressed.
The narrator approaches the tarn that lies near the house, and gazes down into it so as to examine the inverted reflection of the house rather than the house itself. He again mentions the "eye-like windows." The narrator reveals that he’s planning on spending a few weeks with the house’s owner Roderick Usher, a boyhood friend. Usher had sent the narrator a letter about “a mental disorder that oppressed him” and begged his old friend to come and help figure out what was wrong.

Although they were friends in childhood, the narrator knows very little about Usher since he is always extremely reserved. He does know that Usher’s “very ancient family” is famous for its devotion to the arts – music and paintings – and has given a substantial amount of money to support these arts.

The narrator has also heard that the Usher family has only one direct bloodline from its ancestors. As a result, the estate’s name—“The House of Usher”-- refers to the house and to the brother and sister who own it. As we read on, we’ll find that there are similarities between the “character” of the house and the Ushers. Looking up at the house, the narrator feels uneasy.

“…when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—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 pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.”

Observing the house, the narrator decides that it seems substantial and well-cared for even though it is very old with a discernable tiny crack that runs from the roof down the front of the house. The narrator rides up on his horse to the house and is greeted by a servant. He is then taken by a valet to see Usher. As he walks by the heavy objects in the air of heaven, but which had disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread of her gradual wasting away and speculate that she is partially cataleptical.

[Define. Catalepsy Is a condition that occurs in a variety of physical and psychological disorders and is characterized by lack of response to external stimuli and by muscular rigidity, so that the limbs remain in whatever position they are placed.]

“Hitherto Madeleine had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not taken herself finally to bed; but, on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the penetrating, prostrating power of the destroyer....”
For the next several days the narrator tries to help Usher break free from his melancholy. The narrator observes Usher painting. He listens to Usher sing his own strange ballads and dirges, accompanying himself on his “speaking guitar.” He is surprised to learn that Usher’s “chief delight” is the Vigilae Mortuorum, a service for the dead from an obscure church.

Impressed by Usher’s artwork; intense, abstract, and mood-driven creations, the narrator is particularly moved by a vivid Usher painting of a long corridor below the earth, bathed in eerie light although there appears to be no evidence of a light source. He also remembers one of Usher’s ballads: “The Haunted Palace,” the story of a glorious, beautiful palace destroyed by “evil things.” [Poe includes “The Haunted Palace” in the tale and later, published it separately.]

Considering the words of the ballad, the narrator realizes that Usher firmly believes that his house is “sentient,” alive and capable of perceiving and generating things. The evidence for Usher’s claim lies, he believes, in “the condensation of an atmosphere” which lies about the mansion. Usher believes that the arrangement of the gray stones making up his house, the fungus which covers them, the decayed trees, and the house itself mirrored in the tarn are “sentient” (able to feel and affect actions). Usher insists that “that silent, yet important and terrible influence which for centuries had molded the destinies of his family had made him what I now saw him--what he was.”

One night, Usher rushes to the narrator: Madeline is dead. He’s afraid that her doctors will want to perform an autopsy or to experiment on her since her illness was so bizarre. So Usher asks the narrator’s assistance in committing her in an underground vault beneath the house for two weeks until she can have a proper burial. The narrator agrees.

The two men carry Madeline to the vault that, the narrator explains, lies directly underneath his own room in the mansion. As they place Madeline into the coffin, the narrator realizes for the first time, how much she looks like Usher.

“A striking similitude between the brother and the sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them.” Usher explains that they were in fact twins and that they shared a connection which could never be understood by an outsider.

As they screw the coffin closed, the narrator notices that Madeline’s cheeks are flushed and her lips pink. Then they screw the coffin closed. Over the next few days, Usher’s affect and behavior change. He neglects his ordinary duties, looks even paler, and has only a vacant expression in his eyes. He stares into nothingness and seems to be listening to imaginary sounds. The narrator is convinced that Usher is burdened with some oppressive secret.

The narrator soon finds that he himself is now nervous and subject to superstition. One night, about a week after placing Madeline in the tomb, he is frightened by a ranging storm. In the quiet interludes, he thinks he can hear eerie sounds coming from the mansion. He quickly dresses and, leaving his room, sees Usher in the hallway. Even though Usher appears to be upset and disoriented, the narrator decides that any company is preferable to being terrified alone. Usher asks the narrator if he has “seen it.” Usher throws open the windows to the raging storm, and huge, powerful gusts of wind begin burst into the rooms. Outside, the narrator can see an eerie, glowing, gaseous cloud surrounding the mansion.

The narrator tries to assure Usher that the eerie glow is simply an electrical phenomenon and attempts to calm Usher, sitting him down and reading aloud to him. We learn that the book the narrator chooses is The Mad Trist by Sir Launcelot Canning. The narrator finally reaches the part where the book’s hero Ethelred tries to break his way into the dwelling of a hermit. As Ethelred breaks down the door in the story, the narrator and Usher can hear the sounds of a door being smashed through.

[Poe made up the author and title for The Mad Trist. A “Tryst” is a secret meeting between lovers; the implication is the “twinning” between Usher and his sister Madeleine.

Usher, meanwhile, has turned his chair around to face the door to the chamber. The narrator continues reading. As he reads about the sounds of a shield clanging to the ground, he hears the actual sounds reverberating through the palace. Usher begins speaking:

The Mad Trist by Sir Launcelot Canning. 

The narrator finally reaches the part where the book’s hero Ethelred tries to break his way into the dwelling of a hermit. As Ethelred breaks down the door in the story, the narrator and Usher can hear the sounds of a door being smashed through.
[Complete Conclusion.] "We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them --many, many days ago --yet I dared not --I dared not speak! And now --to-night --Ethelred --ha! ha! --the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clanging of the shield! --say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? ....Is she not hurryng to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? MADMAN!" here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul --"MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS WITHOUT THE DOOR!"

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell --the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust --but then without those doors there DID stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. 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.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so wonderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the gates of a market to be erected upon the site of the Jacobin Club House in Paris that closed in 1794. Poe introduces the story with this Latin epigraph that.

Howard Champier Sources. Poe Society of Baltimore; Wikipedia/St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Baltimore; Historicrichmond.org;  
Gutenberg; Britannica.com; Historichampshire.org (Monumental Church); Sources: cliffnotes.com, hrc.utexas.edu/exhibition;  
guttenburgbible.com; Gutenberg-bible.com; History.com; clausenbooks.com/Gutenberg; npl.org/exhibition;  
Bartylbe.com/Beranger; Shmoop; Wikivisually/ussher.com.

Reading 5. Poe, The Pit & the Pendulum (1842)

Introduction. The Pit and the Pendulum was first polished in The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1843. Poe uses realistic details to create a tale of mortal terror based on the nightmare of the 16th C. Spanish Inquisition. Instigated by the Crown and the Spanish Roman Catholic Church, the Priest-Inquisitors tortured and murdered those they believed were heretics: specifically, Jewish converts, Protestants and “witches.” In contrast to the perverse behavior of the Church, Poe offers a man of faith as his narrator. Even in the middle of increasing horror, the narrator has a mystical experience and, eventually, gains mortal salvation.

Historical Context. The 16th C. Spanish Inquisition, a court of the Roman Catholic Church, denounced, persecuted, and executed those whom it considered to be heretics, witches, and or members of other religions. Poe’s epigraph for the tale presents more recent evidence of the abuse of power during the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution.

If you’d be interested in the emergence of the Inquisition and its targets—including Jews who became conversos (Christian converts), here is a link to an excellent summary by the Encyclopedia Britannica.

https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain/The-Spanish-Inquisition#ref587463

The Combination of Summary and Quotes. I’ve attempted to weave quotations from the tale as part of the summary. You’ll find a long passage from the opening of the tale and a shorter one from its conclusion. I’ve preserved Poe’s unusual use of Capital Letters. He emphasizes certain words and moments by presenting them in All Caps.

The Pit and the Pendulum (1843)

Poe introduces the story with this Latin epigraph that 4-line verse below composed for the gates of a market to be erected upon the site of the Jacobin Club House in Paris that closed in 1794.

A. The Epigraph—English Translation: Poe introduces the tale with a Latin epigraph from 4-line verse placed on the gates of a market to be erected upon the site of the Jacobin Club House in Paris that closed in 1794. "Here unholy
torturers with an insatiable thirst for innocent blood, once fed their long frenzy. Now our homeland is safe, the funereal
cave destroyed, and life and health appear where dreadful death once was.” -- [In Latin:  mpia tortorum longos hic
turba fuors--Sanguinis innocui, non satiata, aluit.--Sospite nunc patria, fracto nunc funeris antro,--Mors ubi dira
fuit vita salusque patent.]

B. Significance: The Jacobins constituted the most famous political group of the French Revolution; they were
identified with radical egalitarianism and led the Revolutionary government from mid-1793 to mid-1794. After the
French monarchy fell at the beginning of the 1790s, members of the Jacobin Club assumed power in the new National
Convention that governed France.

Though their politics were moderate at first, they became more and more radical. By 1793, the Jacobins controlled the
government and began to remove their enemies from the Convention. In the last months of their rule, which ended in
the summer of 1794, the Jacobins began executing their enemies by guillotine during what became known as “The Reign
of Terror.” Poe’s epigraph and tale reminds us of the power, of those who wield political, secular, or religious privilege.
It is fitting that the quatrain was placed on the Market Gates that stand before a new space of sustenance and health as
opposed to a regime of terror.

The Pit and the Pendulums: Summary and Quotations
The tale opens as an unnamed narrator is being sentenced to death. His inquisitors are black-robed Roman Catholics.
The narrator hears their voices and sees their blurred images. Just after he is sentenced, the Narrator loses
consciousness. When he awakens, he is in complete darkness. He first THOUGHT is that he will be publicly hanged,
but now is afraid that he will be buried alive. That’s the worst he can imagine, but even grimmer fate awaits him.

Walking around his dark space he concludes that he is in a Toledo dungeon. Ripping off a piece of hem from his robe,
he decides to explore the dungeon, placing the hem against the wall so he can count the steps needed to encircle the
dungeon space (100 paces). He trips on his hem and falls to the ground, losing consciousness.

A. Selection from the Opening Passage
http://www.loudlit.org/audio/pitandpendulum/pages/01_01_pitandpendulum.htm

FIRST QUOTE. “I WAS sick -- sick unto death with that long agony. When they at length unbound me and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence -- the dread sentence of death -- was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears.

After that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of REVOLUTION -- perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a mill wheel. This only for a brief period; for presently I heard no more.

Yet, for a while, I saw; but with how terrible an exaggeration! I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white -- whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words -- and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness -- of immovable resolution -- of stern contempt of human torture.

I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate, were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment.

And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they wore the aspect of charity; and seemed white and slender angels who would save me; but then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fiber in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel FORMS became meaningless specters, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no help. And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the THOUGHT of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. The THOUGHT came gently and stealthily, and it seemed long before it attained full appreciation....

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; yet all was not lost. In the deepest slumber -- no! In delirium -- no! In a swoon -- no! In death -- no! even in the grave all is not lost. Else there is no immortality for man. Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed.
In the return to life from the swoon there are two stages: first, that of the sense of mental or spiritual; secondly, that of the sense of physical, existence. It seems probable that if, upon reaching the second stage, we could recall the impressions of the first, we should find these impressions eloquent in memories of the gulf beyond. And that gulf is -- what? How at least shall we distinguish its shadows from those of the tomb? But if the impressions of what I have termed the first stage, are not, at will, recalled, yet, after long interval, do they not come unbidden, while we marvel whence they come? He who has never swooned, is not he who finds strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coals that glow; is not he who beholds floating in mid-air the sad visions that the many may not view; is not he who ponders over the perfume of some novel flower -- is not he whose brain grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence which has never before arrested his attention.” END OF FIRST QUOTE

SUMMARY. After waking up, the narrator eats the bread and water placed next to him. He tries to walk across the room, but falls. He decides to walk across the room, but as he walks he falls a 3rd time. When he hits the floor, he notices that his face is dangling over a pit. Wrenching a stone from the wall, he tests the pit’s death and learns that the pit is deep with water at the bottom. After thinking about the purpose of the pit, the narrator falls asleep again. On waking up, he finds more bread and water (that is drugged). He consumes both and passes out.

Looking up, the narrator sees the figure of Time painted on the ceiling and a sharp, scythe-like pendulum, swinging back and forth—slowly advancing towards him. In the dim light, he sees that he is bound to a wooden board by a long surcingle across his body.

QUOTE 2. “Dreading to find my faint, and, as it seemed, last hope frustrated, I so far elevated my head as to obtain a distinct view of my breast. The surcingle enveloped my limbs and body close in all directions -- SAVE IN THE PATH OF THE DESTROYING CRESCENT: [Definition. Surcingle: A belt or band passing around the body (of a horse, binding the saddle or pack to the horse’s back.) END OF QUOTE.

SUMMARY. Within the reach of one hand, is a plate with meat, but he has no stomach for food. As the pendulum lowers, the narrator notices uneasily that rats are coming out of the pit and rushing towards the meat next to him. Even though the situation seems hopeless, the narrator has HOPE and an idea. Right before the pendulum starts to slice his body, he rubs the meat from the plate on the strap that is binding him to the platform. The rats are drawn to it and start gnawing on the leather bond.

QUOTE 3. “Nor had I erred in my calculations -- nor had I endured in vain. I at length felt that I was free. The surcingle hung in ribands from my body. But the stroke of the pendulum already pressed upon my bosom. It had divided the serge of the robe. It had cut through the linen beneath. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain shot through every nerve. But the moment of escape had arrived. At a wave of my hand my deliverers hurried tumultuously away. With a steady movement -- cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and slow -- I slid from the embrace of the bandage and beyond the reach of the scimitar. For the moment, at least, I WAS FREE.” [Definition. Ribands: Ribbons used as decorations.] END OF QUOTE

SUMMARY. As he escapes, the pendulum retracts into the ceiling; the narrator realizes that he is being watched. Suddenly, the walls of the prison began to heat up and move towards the pit. The narrator figures out that the inquisitors are moving the walls to push him into the pit to kill him. Even if he tries to escape, he will die. When there is barely room for a foothold, the walls suddenly retract and cool. The horror has taken its toll.

Selection from the Tale’s Conclusion

Closing Quote to Pit & Pendulum read by Rob Harrison, 2:39 Min. Text Provided.

http://www.loudlit.org/audio/pitandpendulum/pages/01_19_pitandpendulum.htm

CLOSING QUOTE. “The heat rapidly increased, and once again I looked up, shuddering as with a fit of the ague. There had been a second change in the cell -- and now the change was obviously in the form. As before, it was in vain that I, at first, endeavored to appreciate or understand what was taking place. But not long was I left in doubt.

The Inquisitorial vengeance had been hurried by my two-fold escape. and there was to be no more dallying with the King of Terrors. The room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were now acute -- two, consequently, obtuse. The fearful difference quickly increased with a low rumbling or moaning sound. In an instant the apartment had shifted its form into that of a lozenge. [Definition: Lozenge=something shaped like a diamond. The tiny, diamond shaped walls are becoming more and more compressed.]
But the alteration stopped not HERE—I neither hoped nor desired it to stop. I could have clasped the red walls to my bosom as a garment of eternal peace. “Death.” I said, “any death but that of the pit!” Fool! might I have not known that into the pit it was the object of the burning iron to urge me? Could I resist its glow? or, if even that, could I withstand its pressure.

And now, flatter and flatter grew the lozenge, with a rapidity that left me no time for contemplation. Its center, and of course, its greatest width, came just over the yawning gulf. I shrank back -- but the closing walls pressed me resistlessly onward. At length for my seared and writhing body there was no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the prison. I struggled no more, but the agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and final scream of despair.

. I felt that I tottered upon the brink -- I averted my eyes. -- There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies.

THE END.

Reading 6. Poe and Religion

Orphaned at age 3, Poe’s life was defined by a series of early deaths: his mother, his foster mother, his brother, and his young wife. He faced other hardships as well. He struggled with illness, poverty, and rejection from the powerful literary establishment. Amazingly, he had faith in his call as a poet and writer and in his belief that there would be a different and positive future after death: “...in a future existence, we shall look upon what we think our present existence, as a dream” (1849). He was humble before his God. According to his attending physician Dr. John Moran, Poe’s final words were “Lord, help my poor soul.”

In the first half of the 19th C., the Episcopal Church in Virginia, the strong Anglican-Catholic elements had been somewhat relaxed, but the core ritual remained. Christianity, in general, was dominant in both the South and Northeast during a time BEFORE Darwin’s theory of evolution and the horrors of the Civil War.

At age 3 on January 7, 1812, he was baptized by the Episcopal Reverend John Buchanan; his foster parents John and Frances Allan were his godparents. Although no actual record exists, it is generally agreed that Poe was confirmed at the Monumental Episcopal Church by Bishop Richard Channing Moore. During his youth, Poe and his foster mother read and discussed the Bible. Scholars point out that Poe consistently uses numerous Biblical quotations in his poems and short stories.

Poe attended church periodically, but became more active when he moved to New York. In 1848, he wrote Marie Louise Shew, his wife’s caretaker and a close friend: “...it was you who renewed my hopes and faith in God? ... Why I was not a priest is a mystery, for I feel I am now a prophet.”

The small Bible his wife Virginia had given him was one of the books in his trunk, eventually recovered after his death. He had marked the Lord’s Prayer. In addition, he read and made notations in his edition of the Reverend Thomas Chalmers’ On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God (1833).

Poe believed that love and charity toward humankind was a moral imperative. He insists: “A strong argument for the religion of Christ is this — that offenses against Charity are about the only ones which men on their death-beds can be made — not to understand — but to feel — as crime” (Marginalia, 1849).

Here are the related Internet sources connected to Poe and Religion: eapoe.org; clarksworldmagazine.com (Buckholz); parisreview.org; thepoedecoder.com. The Baltimore Poe Society also provided information on Poe’s “Colloquy of Monos and Una” and Eric Carlson’s excellent essay “Poe on the Soul of Man.”

Reading 7. Summary and Comment, The Imp of the Perverse (1845)

Overview. This little-known Poe short story began as an essay in which Poe described his self-destructive impulses; however, the essay soon evolved into a tale in but evolved into a tale in which Poe created a being called the imp of the perverse. The tale begins with the narrator’s explaining to us readers what the definition of perverse means.

For the narrator, perverse means doing or thinking something we know we shouldn’t; its form of self-sabotage since it goes against our natural instinct for survival and self-preservation. For example, you’re standing at the edge of a cliff and suddenly have the urge to jump. You know it’s a crazy idea, but slowly you find yourself inching closer to the edge thinking about the fall. Poe writes in this tale: “There is no passion in nature so demonically impatient, as that of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge...that single thought is enough. The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing.” Poe makes clear that
In one of Poe's famous tales *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), the "imp of the perverse" also becomes a subconscious need to confess, as if the heavy burden of guilt might be lightened. Eric Carlson suggests this insight: "In the most depraved, Poe seems to say, the moral sense finally cannot be denied. If the criminal in these tales is compelled by a tell-tale sense of guilt as an expression of the deeper soul, then we have reason to reject the old notions that Poe's writings lack 'morality' or 'heart.'" Be sure to notice and think about the narrator's final thought: "To-day I wear these chains, and am here! To-morrow I shall be fetterless—but where?"

**Summary.** The unnamed narrator describes this spirit as the agent that tempts people to do things simply because they feel they shouldn't do them. Exploring themes of temptation, arrogance, and the fear that we will be consumed by our temptations, "The Imp of the Perverse" is one of Poe's more obscure titles, and received mixed reviews from critics due to its complex psychological and metaphysical elements. It is considered an early example of transcendentalist writing, and many of the elements involving the subconscious and repression are considered to be forerunners of the work of Sigmund Freud. Although it is not considered a major Poe work, it has been subject to considerable analysis by scholars in the fields of literature and psychology.

The tale opens with the unnamed narrator explaining his theory on the persistent *imp of the perverse*. He believes that this imp causes people to commit acts against their best interests. We then find that the narrator committed a murder and is on death row. Not surprisingly then, when the narrator tells us that the imp has had countless victims, the narrator includes himself.

The narrator thought he had crafted an unsolvable murder. He knew that his victim frequently read in bed at night in a room that had poor ventilation. So he murdered the man by using a candle that emitted a poisonous vapor when burned. The victim suffocated, leaving no physical evidence of murder behind. As a result, the coroner ruled the death a simple act of God. The narrator tells us how grandly he benefited greatly from this act of murder. He inherited the victim's estate and was sure he would never be caught. He enjoyed the benefit of his murderous act for many years. The case is considered closed.

The years go by, and the narrator remains above suspicion. However, he is still occasionally consumed by doubt. He uses a mantra to calm himself by repeating softly to himself: "I am safe." This ritual works until, one day the narrator realizes that the only way he can be found out is if he is foolish enough to openly confess. The minute this thought comes to mind, he begins to consider whether or not he is capable of confessing. The more he thinks about it, the more he is filled with a sense of dread. He goes outside for air. Here is Poe's conclusion to the tale:

"At first, I made an effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I walked vigorously—faster—still faster—at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror. For, alas! I well, too well understood that to think, in my situation, was to be lost. I still quickened my pace. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. At length, the populace took the alarm, and pursued me. I felt then the consummation of my fate. Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it, but a rough voice resounded in my ears—a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulder. I turned—I gasped for breath.

For a moment I experienced all the pangs of suffocation: I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul. They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell. Having related all that was necessary for the fullest judicial conviction, I fell prostrate in a swoon. But why shall I say more? To-day I wear these chains, and am here! To-morrow I shall be fetterless—but where?"

**The End.**

**Reading 8. Poe's Articles of Faith and Introduction & Selections from *Eureka* (1848)**

A. "Articles of Faith." I've used "Articles of Faith" to describe what seem to me to be Poe's essential and evolving spiritual beliefs. As part of that discussion, I've woven quotations from Poe's *Colloquy* (1841), *Marginalia* (1844-49 fragmentary manuscript material), and his penultimate work *Eureka* (1849). Among the relatively few discussions of Poe's faith and *Eureka*, I'm grateful for the work Poe scholar Eric W. Carlson, who attempted to map out he stages of Poe's faith as reflected in his writings and correspondence.

**Article 1.** God is omnipotent and the ongoing Creator of everything. As *Eureka* concludes, Poe declares: "...with the very idea of God, omnipotent, omniscient, we entertain, also, the idea of the infallibility of his laws."
With Him there being neither Past nor Future — with Him all being is Now — do we not insult him in supposing his laws so contrived as to provide for every possible contingency? ’’ He goes on to say that all things are part of God. ’’...a God, self-existing and alone existing, became all things at once, through dint of his volition, while all things were thus constituted a portion of God.’’

Article 2. The Holy Vision of Eden and Paradise are glimpsed in our dreams and through our imagination. In Eureka, Poe tells us that Youth is said to be “peculiarly haunted by such dreams; yet never mistaking them for dreams.” This vision is a “holy dream” of an “evergreen and radiant Paradise.” Poe emphasizes this insight in early work (1827-1831). Poe reclaims a part of that lost Eden in the landscape of his ambitious early poem Al Aaraaf (1829) which we discussed during our 2nd Poe session and in Israel (1831) which we’ll discuss in this Poe session. Comment by Eric Carlson: “The reality of this “dream within a dream” lies in the power of its ideal values — Innocence, Joy, Love, and Beauty — the haunting Memory of a lost Eden — deep in some Collective Unconscious — represents the potential of harmony of self with nature, of self with soul...and of soul with some transcendent...Beauty. [However,] the inmemorial dream-ideal is threatened or destroyed by passing time, by the illusory reality of appearances, by ambition, and by passion....”

Article 3. The tree Soul fueled by the Spiritual Imagination reveals a glimpse of the ecstasy that is to come after death. “There is...a class of fancies of exquisite delicacy, which are not thoughts, and to which...I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language... They arise in the soul only at the heights of the most intense tranquility — when the bodily and mental health are in perfection — and at that mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blends with those of the world of dreams... Moreover, these ‘fancies’ are accompanied by an ecstasy more voluptuous then all raptures experienced in the real world or in the world of dreams.” From Marginalia (1844-1849, fragmentary manuscript material),

Article 4. The Spirit of Man must confront Death in order “To Be.” The salvation of humanity to survive the test of a confrontation with death circumstances that seem doomed. From 1831-1844, Poe published the majority of his murder and horror stories. Thus, many share the view that Poe’s exploration of pathological and psychotic behavior mirrors his belief that such humans lack humanity and soul. However, as Eric Carlson insists, Poe and these stories explore the “Spirit of Man confronted by death—either as a discovery or ending.” The Pit and the Pendulum, included in this packet, is just such an example as is The Imp of the Perverse, also included in this packet.

Article 5. Eternal Life exists. Poe accepts the mystery that there is something beyond death. “What I here propound [propose] is true: — therefore it cannot die: — or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will ‘rise again to the Life Everlasting’” -- Eureka (1848)

Article 6. Man must be reborn into enduring love. Man has fallen because he has only materialistic knowledge and is devoid of the poetic imagination. Thus, the fallen man defies the laws of nature. In the 1841 Colloquy of blessed spirits Monos and Una, Una describes how “huge cities arose, innumerable. Green leaves shrank before the breath of furnaces. The fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease.” Monos and Una see little hope for humankind. They anticipate “no regeneration save in death. That man, as a race, should not become extinct...he must be born again....This rebirth requires individual deaths—sleeps from which one awakens into the light of enduring love.” While he lives, man may simulate death in the realm of dreams, for only in dreams can mortals transcend to worlds beyond. In the twilight of dreams.

B. Introduction to Eureka (1849) Satisfied that this small book was the culmination of his career, Poe wrote Maria Clemm on July 7, 1849: “I have no desire to live since I have done Eureka. I could accomplish nothing more.” Ironically and sadly, he, who was engaged and looking forward to a long life, would die a mysterious death in just 3 more months (October 6 1849).

Poe as Prophet. Even though only 500 copies of Eureka were printed, Poe considered the essay the culmination of career work. Only 500 copies of the essay were printed. In 2005, the New York Times reconsidered the essay and Poe’s remarkable accomplishment. “Poe’s essay Eureka describes what we now call the Butterfly Effect. It also portrays the origin of the universe in a way that would later be known to physicists as the Big Bang Theory. “Poe also insists that the beginning of the universe was generated from a single “primordial particle” which then radiated or diffused into space.
Poe, Scientist and Truth teller. Poe eagerly absorbed—and sometimes rejected— theoretical works by the brilliant astronomer Sir John Herschel, the popular scientist J. P. Nichol, and the eccentric naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, to whom Poe dedicated Eureka. Poe also uses himself in the role of a scientist from the distant future who can dismiss his contemporaries for “their pompous and infatuate proscription of all other roads to Truth than the two narrow and crooked paths—the one of creeping and the other of crawling—to which, in their infinite perversity, they have dared to confine the Soul—the Soul which loves nothing so well as to soar in those regions of illimitable intuition which are utterly incognizant of path.”

Poe and Poetic Intuition. “That the ‘machinery of the universe’ could be, as Poe memorably put it, guessed—disclosed ‘through mere dint of intuition’—was as dubious a suggestion for readers in 1848 as it would be for most physicists today. Poe [like a few other writers in his day, notably Ralph Waldo Emerson] openly opposes the attempts of most philosophers to] ‘bar off one or another roadway to inquiry.’ To track its free and erratic movements was to watch the universe at work.” --Max Nelson, The Machinery of the Universe (Paris Review, July 2015.)

Accused of Blasphemy. Poe all things are part of God: “. . . a God, self-existing and alone existing, became all things at once, through dint of its volition, while all things were thus constituted a portion of God.” Because of this statement, and others, Poe suggested that we were all god and was astonished to discover that some misunderstood his ideas as being blasphemous.

Poe on the “Big Bang” Theory: “To conclude this branch of the subject: I am fully warranted in announcing that the Law which we call Gravity exists on account of Matter’s having been radiated, at its origin, atomically, into a limited sphere of Space, from one, individual, unconditional, irrelative, and absolute Particle Proper, by the sole process in which it was possible to satisfy, at the same time, the two conditions, radiation and equable distribution throughout the sphere— that is to say, by a force varying in direct proportion with the squares of the distances between the radiated atoms, respectively, and the Particular center of Radiation.”

In a lengthy letter responding to a criticism in the Literary World, Poe ends with “Were these ‘misrepresentations’ . . . made for any less serious a purpose than that of branding my book as ‘impious’ and myself as a ‘pantheist,’ a ‘polytheist,’ a Pagan, or a God knows what . . . I would have permitted their dishonesty to pass unnoticed, through pure contempt for the boyishness— for the turn-down-shirt-collar-ness of their tone . . .”

C. Additional Eureka Selections with Commentary.
From the Preface, “I design to speak of the Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical — of the Material and Spiritual Universe: of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny....To the few who love me and whom I love — to those who feel rather than to those who think — to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities — I offer this Book of Truths....What I here propound [propose] is true: — therefore it cannot die: — or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will ‘rise again to the Life Everlasting’.”

Poe explains that all things are part of God. “. . . God, self-existing and alone existing, became all things at once, through dint of his volition, while all things were thus constituted a portion of God.” Poe was astonished to discover that some readers considered his ideas to be blasphemy. In a long 1848 letter, Poe discounted the negative criticism: “Were these ‘misrepresentations’ . . . made for any less serious a purpose than that of branding my book as ‘impious’ and myself as a ‘pantheist,’ a ‘polytheist,’ a Pagan, or a God knows what . . . I would have permitted their dishonesty to pass unnoticed, through pure contempt for the boyishness....”

Poe’s intuition tells him that the universe is finite, that it came about by the “radiation of atoms out from a single primordial Particle...what Newton called gravity is nothing but the attraction of every atom to the other atoms with which it once shared an identity... and that, eventually, the universe will collapse back into its original, unitary state.”

For Poe, poetic thinking involves both observing and emulating the movements of the natural world. Declares Poe: “The source of all motion is thought.” Says one of the blessed heavenly spirits. “There are no dreams in Aiden [Eden] — but it is here whispered that, of this infinity of matter, the sole purpose is to afford infinite springs, at which the soul may allay the thirst which is forever unquenchable within it — since to quench it, would be to extinguish the soul’s self” (Poe, The Power of Words, 1845).
Writing in *Eureka* about the universe’s “complete mutuality of adaptation”—the notion that any given element in what he called a “Divine construction” could be taken either for an element of the original design or an adaptive consequence of that design—Poe proposes that plot in fiction is a very, very dim reflection of the universe:

“The pleasure which we derive from any display of human ingenuity is the ratio of the approach to this species of reciprocity. In the construction of plot for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is really, or practically, unattainable—but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The universe is a plot of God.”

At the end of *Eureka*, Poe gathers together the concept of Divine Will, the continual rebirth of the Universe, and his belief that each soul is at one and the same time its own God & Creator and part of the Spirit Divine. Each human shares an original identity with God. According to Poe, ultimately the sum of each separate soul consciousness will become a single mass, and “ingathering” where the “myriads of individual intelligences become one.”

**The Final Lines in Eureka.** “Think that the sense of individual entity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness — that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah. In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life — Life — Life within Life — the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine.”

**Internet Sources for Articles of Faith, Eureka, Colloquy: Some discussions and quotations come from the analysis of Eureka provided in “Poe and Religion” article by the Poe Society of Baltimore’ clarksworldmagazine.com (Buckhole); Wikipedia; poedecoder.com; scientificamerica.com;eapoe.org;**

**Reading 9. Poe, Eldorado with References & Comment**

[Underlined words are explained after the poem. A brief comment is also provided.]

<table>
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<th>Eldorado</th>
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| 1. Gaily bedight, A gallant knight, In sunshine and in shadow, / Had journeyed long, Singing a song, In search of Eldorado. | 3. And, as his strength Failed him at length, He met a pilgrim shadow— "Shadow," said he, "Where can it be— This land of Eldorado?"
| 2. But he grew old— This knight so bold— And o’er his heart a shadow Fell as he found No spot of ground That looked like Eldorado. | 4. "Over the Mountains Of the Moon, Down the Valley of the Shadow, Ride, boldly ride," The shade replied— "If you seek for Eldorado!"

**Background and Definitions**

**Legends of El Dorado.** The genesis of El Dorado (a derivative of the Spanish word “Oro”-“Gold”) comes from tales of the Muiscan tribe, who occupied areas of Colombia beginning in 1270 BC. However, for the Musca, gold had no association with wealth; it was prized for its use as a central religious offering. When a new king was named, an elaborate ritual was performed. The newly appointed king was stripped naked, encased in gold dust and sent with his attendants on a decorated raft to the middle of the sacred lake where the attendants would throw the precious artifacts into sacred Lake Guatavita. In 1969, villagers in the hills south of Bogota found such a golden raft. While El Dorado refers to the Gilded One, the name has become synonymous with the lost city of gold and any other place where one can quickly discover great riches.

The legend sparked the Spanish conquistadores’ futile 16th C. quests in South America. Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco de Orellana led such an expedition, but the voyage ended in disease and hunger although Orellana eventually discovered the Amazon River. A 17th C. El Dorado expedition launched by English explorer Sir Walter Raleigh proved disastrous. Headed by Raleigh’s son Watt, the team found no City of Gold, but they did encounter a disastrous conflict with Spanish...
explores, who killed Raleigh’s son. English explorers in the New World had been explicitly ordered to avoid conflict with the Spanish due to the delicate diplomatic situation between the two empires. Raleigh’s actions were seen as dangerously reckless, and he was executed on the orders of King James.

- **Stanza 1.** *Gaily bedight.* “Dressed splendidly.” *Gallant:* “Chivalrous and brave.”
- **Stanza 2, 3, 4.** *Shadow, Pilgrim’s Shadow, Shade.* When Poe writes *Pilgrim’s Shadow*, he moves the search for Eldorado into a spiritual quest. A “Pilgrim, is a devout person who journeys to a sacred place for religious reasons. In stanza 3, the knight asks for directions from a *pilgrim shadow.* In stanza 4, the shade (the spirit or ghost of a dead person from the underworld) explains that he must ride boldly through the Valley of the Shadow.
- **Stanza 4.** *Mountains of the Moon.* Many people of the ancient world were curious about the source of the Nile, especially ancient Greek geographers. A number of expeditions up the Nile failed to find the source. Eventually, a merchant named reported that he had traveled inland in *East Africa* for 250 days and had found the source of the Nile. He reported it flowed from a group of massive mountains into a series of large lakes. The native called this mountain range the Mountains of the Moon because of their snowcapped whiteness.

**Brief Summary of Pilgrim’s Progress (1678): Possible Poe Influence.** It is likely that Poe would have been familiar with Bunyan’s Christian allegory. Here’s a brief summary.

The narrator tells us about the complicated dream he had when he fell asleep in the wilderness. He dreamt of a man named Christian, who was tormented by spiritual anguish. Christian takes the advice of the Evangelist, a spiritual guide, and leaves the City of Destruction (this World) to seek Salvation in the Celestial City (in the land of Beulah) on top of Mount Zion. His way is difficult because he is carrying a very, very heavy burden (“Sin”).

He encounters a series of obstacles: “the Slough of Despond,” “the Doubting Castle,” and “the Hill of Difficulty.” He finds respite in “the House of the Palace Beautiful” (a place God provides to refresh Pilgrims). Christian leaves the Palace clothed with the Armor of God which comes in handy when Christian battles the demonic Apollyon, Lord of the City of Destruction. Christian defeats him, and, as night falls, he enters the Valley of the Shadow of Death, a place of terror. Then he hears the words of the 23rd psalm.

Eventually, he meets a fellow pilgrim Hopeful. Together Christian and Hopeful happily approach the land of Beulah, where the Celestial City is located. The landscape teems with flowers and fruit, and the travelers are refreshed. To reach the gate into the city, they must first cross a river without a bridge. Christian nearly drowns, but Hopeful reminds him of Christ’s love, and Christian emerges safely from the water. The residents of the Celestial City joyously welcome the two pilgrims.

**Summary of the Poem.** In **Stanza 1**, a gaily dressed, valiant young knight sings as he moves cheerfully through sunshine and shade. He is confident of success. In **Stanza 2**, the dark shadow is cast over his heart. Many years have passed, and the knight, still bold, has aged; his heart is shadowed (in despair) because he has not found Eldorado. By the 3rd stanza, the knight’s strength is failing. He encounters a pilgrim shadow for directions to this promised place. In **stanzas 4**, the shade (who was once a pilgrim like the knight) explains that to find the place of living water (the Mountains of the Moon). He must go down through the Valley of the Shadow to find the eternal, golden place of imagination and celestial treasures.

**Comment on the Poem.** In April 1849, *Eldorado*, one of Poe’s last poems appeared in the Boston-based *The Flag of Our Union*. A likely impetus for the poem was the 1848 discovery of gold in the Sacramento area. In 1848, about one thousand non-natives were living in the California territory; by the end of 1849, that number was 100 thousand.

The fact that the main character is a knight searching for the city of gold immediately suggests a link to the quest for the Holy Grail. The legendary Mountains of the Moon are connected to the El Dorado legend and to the search for the source of the Nile—the source of “living water.”

The use of the phrase “living water” would resonate with its references to Jesus’ words in the New Testament. Poe knew his Bible. By the last stanza, the knight and we as readers are enmeshed in a spiritual journey. Given the “directions” by the shade, the knight and we must go through the Valley of the Shadow, a clear reference to Psalm 23. Remember, however, that Psalm 23 is to give hope to the living when they fear death. In case you doubt Poe’s intellect and cleverness, Stanza 4 has 23 words (i.e., the 23rd Psalm). Poe also cleverly rhymes Eldorado and shadow as though they are linked to one another.

Notice as well that Poe uses shade in the middle of each of the 4 stanzas. The meaning shifts from a “real” shade which blocks out the sun in **Stanza 1** to having an emblem of despair in **Stanza 2**. In **Stanza 3**, the word is used twice as a *Pilgrim shadow* and shade; and in **Stanza 4**, the Valley of the Shadow.