

**INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE  
ENGLISH A  
GROUP 1, CATEGORY 1  
EXTENDED ESSAY**

**TOPIC:** Death in Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne

**Research Question:** How is the subject of death treated in the selected short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne?

## **ABSTRACT**

This extended essay examines how death is treated in selected short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The essay explores the research question in terms of literary devices, symbols, tone and mood used when portraying death and the contextual or thematic results of these portrayals. The arguments and claims in the extended essay are supported with quotes from the literary pieces or supported with evidence from the short stories.

The essay investigates the research question in two main aspects, namely the portrayal of death and the function of death within the context of the short stories. When discussing the portrayal of death, the literary devices used, the tone and mood created, the characterization and the foreshadowing used by the authors are determined and their relative effect on the portrayal of death are conferred. When determining the function of death, the themes related to or a result of death are explored and if any, the authors' personal intentions are identified.

In the conclusion, it is determined that with respect to the portrayal of death, Poe mainly uses the unity of effect, associating all aspects of his stories to central themes by affixing symbolic values to them, while Hawthorne displays subjective narration, symbolic elements and motifs. In comparison, Poe's portrayal of death is more artistic when compared to Hawthorne's realistic portrayal of death. With respect to the function of death, Poe uses death to explore the philosophical order of life and psychological state of the individual, whereas Hawthorne uses death to comment on social norms, myths, human nature and religion.

Word Count: 260

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Romanticism, a literary movement originated in the 18th century, emphasizes the irrational, the subjective, the emotional and the visual. Dark Romanticism, a literary subgenre, portrays the philosophy of possessing minimal confidence regarding the notion of perfection as an innate quality of humankind. Dark Romantics present individuals prone to sin and self-destruction.

Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, leading authors of Dark Romanticism and gothic literature, use death, a central theme of gothic literature, in their short stories to display their impressions of human nature and the order of life and death. When conveying death, Poe embraces the “art for art’s sake” movement by manipulating all aspects of reality to serve a single purpose through the use of literary devices. Poe uses death to analyse the concept of life and death and individualistic topics such as self versus alter egos. On the other hand, Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays death through subjective narration and powerful symbolism, and in turn, conveys human nature, psychology, social norms, myths and their respective impact. Thus, two authors of the same period, influenced by the same literary movements, writing about identical central themes, differ in portrayal and thus function, which is the focal point of this essay’s investigation.

This essay investigates the subject of death in two short stories by each author: *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Cask of Amontillado* by Poe and *The Birthmark* and *Ethan Brand* by Hawthorne. The essay explores the subject of death in two aspects: the portrayal of death and the function of death. Throughout the main body of the essay, each short story is investigated separately and then compared contextually and linguistically. In the conclusion, the two authors, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, are compared concerning the portrayal and function of death within their short stories.

Edgar Allan Poe's short story, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, portrays the complementary relationship between a sickness stricken brother and sister, consumed by a trapping, decaying setting through the observations of an unnamed narrator. The short story is introduced to the audience through the time and setting, 'a dull, dark and soundless day', 'the clouds hung oppressively low in the heaven', (POE, page 148) creating 'an atmosphere which had reeked up from the decayed trees -, and grey walls and silent tarn- a pestilent and mystic vapour dull, sluggish, faintly discernable and leaden hued' (POE, page 150). Poe's use of words such as 'dull', 'dark', 'oppressive', 'decayed', 'sluggish', create strong imagery forming an atmosphere connotative with phrases such as diseased, dying and claustrophobia. Thus, the atmosphere of the story sets a foundation parallel to the diseased state and death of the characters.

The two main characters, Roderick Usher and Lady Madeline, are characterized in a complementary manner. Roderick is portrayed as extremely sick with a 'ghastly pallor of the skin', 'cadaverousness of complexion' (POE, page 151) and weak, so much that 'his eyes were tortured by even a faint light' (POE, page 152). Yet Roderick possesses an intellect in arts, music and literature, exhibiting intellectual power contrasting his physical weakness. Lady Madeline, Roderick's twin sister, is also characterized with a disease which causes 'a gradual wasting away of the person' (POE, page 153). However, unlike Roderick, Madeline faces her malady with the utmost sternness; 'she had steadily born up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed' (POE, page 153). Both siblings portray death and dying, yet the way they cope with their diseased path to death display two distinct aspects of one personality. While Roderick's physical weakness but intellectual fortitude displays the psychological aspect of a personality, Madeline and the superhuman strength she displays in fighting her malady and death, conveys the physical prospect of an individual. Therefore, death

is portrayed as a phenomenon that can be overcome with the strength of the unifying aspect of the twins.

Closely related with the atmosphere and a part of the setting, is the House of Usher personified with 'eye like windows' (POE, page 148). The house is associated with the cause of the 'constitutional' 'family evil' of the Ushers' (POE, page 152), the unnatural nature of their malady, and is responsible for confining the twins to the claustrophobic house, disabling them from developing as individuals, eventually leading to Madeline's death. Therefore death is portrayed as a curse inflicted by an antagonistically personified setting. The antagonistic portrayal of the house of Usher, inflicting death upon its inhabitants, displays Poe's use of unity of effect to portray the central theme, death. From the atmosphere of the short story to the inanimate setting, the word choice and the characterization of the twins, all structural elements of the story, convey death.

The narrator observes 'a barely perceptible fissure' extending from the roof of the building 'until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn' (POE, page 150). The crack behaves as a ticking bomb which erupts once Madeline and her brother reunite. It functions as the concrete symbol of the line between life and death and Madeline vanquishes that line. Hence death is portrayed as conquerable, resulting in both the literal rebirth of Madeline and the metaphorical rebirth of the twins' unity.

Madeline's death and rebirth in *The Fall of the House of Usher* displays the twins' ironic love-hate relationship. Madeline's return from death could be interpreted as her intense love for her brother. Yet once she returns from death, she kills her brother while embracing him, leading to the collapse of the entire house. This displays an image of Madeline seeking the revenge of those who buried her, conveying the hateful aspect of their relationship. Death functions as the switch between their love-hate relationship. Proceeding Madeline's

reincarnation, it becomes clear that the twins are in fact inseparable and portray a single individual. The complementary characteristics reflect the distinct egos of a single personality. Thus Madeline's reincarnation portrays the reunion of two divergent aspects of life. The main purpose of death is to display the thin line between life and death through the symbolic nature of the crack in the house, therefore reaching the conclusion regarding the inseparable yet the non-trespassable nature of life and death and the price of conquering death.

Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Cask of Amontillado* displays the plotted murder of Fortunato, narrated by the murderer himself, Montresor. Poe uses negative symmetry when characterizing the two men's physical appearance and personality traits. While Fortunato is described as wearing 'a tight fitting party-striped dress' 'surrounded by the conical cap and bells' (POE, page 202), Montresor is depicted as wearing a black silk mask covering his face. The opposing colour imagery of the costumes depicts their physical contrast. Consequently, the men's characterization demonstrates the same contrast. Fortunato displays 'excessive warmth' (POE, page 202), and is described as a drunk, humorous extrovert, inheriting a childlike innocence, while Montresor is characterized as being in control and an introvert. The negative symmetry of the characters is conveyed verbally, in the statement "He is not I." "I am not he." exhibiting Poe's use of syntax. The excessively opposing characterization of the two men, presented as friends, displays their incompatibility and could be interpreted as the cause of murder, foreshadowing Fortunato's death. The story is set in the 'supreme madness of the carnival season' (POE, page 202). The carnival, representing the abandonment of social order, creates a platform welcoming an act which repels social order, namely murder and death. Hence, death in *The Cask of Amontillado* is portrayed as a reflection of personal dilemmas and the personal desires of a revenge-thirsty individual.

Murder is depicted as a journey down a crypt, ultimately leading to Fortunato's death. The crypt is described with walls which 'had been lined with human remains', displaying a calamitous, highly unfavourable environment. Hence, the two men's trip to the underground crypt could be a metaphor for a trip to hell or the realm of the dead, therefore displaying the path to death and murder as a satanic path leading to highly unfavorable results. Within the metaphorical imagery of Montresor's family emblem; 'A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure, the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel'(POE, page 204), Fortunato could be interpreted as the serpent, teasing Montresor with biting insults and Montresor the boot which eventually crushes him. Similarly, the boot could represent the clumsiness of Fortunato stepping into the clever trap of the sneaky serpent, Montresor. Thus, the emblem foreshadows the ultimate death of Fortunato. Similarly, the conversation between Fortunato and Montresor regarding the Masonic order: 'You are not of the masons.' 'It is this' I answered producing a trowel' foreshadows the tool, the 'trowel' (POE, page 205), which Montresor uses to build the walls of the niche. Thus, when Montresor states he is a member of the Masons by producing a trowel, he reveals that he is a stonemason who builds things from stone, namely Fortunato's grave.

The death of Fortunato is portrayed with many ironies. The most blatant being Fortunato's name, which means the fortunate one in Italian. However, Fortunato faces the most unfortunate end. Furthermore, Montresor's black silk mask represents blind justice, but ironically, Montresor displays the gothic opposite, biased revenge. The frequent foreshadowing builds suspense until the climactic death of Fortunato and portrays the irony of his death as Fortunato lacks the ability to see through Montresor's sarcasm and the irony of the situation. The fact that Montresor enjoys his companion's cluelessness conveys his sadistic, sickly morals. Hence, Fortunato's death also portrays the result of man's dark desire to seek revenge.



*The Cask of Amontillado* displays the biased, unjust murder of Fortunato narrated by the murderer himself, Montresor. Thus, the primary purpose of death is to depict the slay of conscience through the pleasant life Montresor continued living and how he lived to proudly tell the tale of Fortunato's death. Death also serves as a depiction of the lack of lawful means for retribution, which enables Montresor to punish Fortunato as he wills, lacking any substantial evidence of his wrongdoing. Finally, the death of Fortunato depicts the horrific possible outcome of subjective interpretation. While the humorous, extroverted Fortunato could have simply been joking, Montresor's misinterpretation of his jokes leads to his death. The subjective point of view of the story, Montresor's thoughts and narration, further support the claim that all Montresor believes in might simply be misinterpretations.

With reference to both of Poe's short stories, *The House of Usher* displays a more philosophical approach to the portrayal of death, conveying the thin line between life and death and how deranging this order leads to demolition. *The Cask of Amontillado*, nonetheless, displays an individualized, personal portrayal of death, depicted as a result of Montresor's personal quest for revenge for Fortunato's unaccounted offensive remarks. Yet the means of the portrayal of death in both short stories, display Poe's use of unity of effect within linguistic and literary devices. In *The House of Usher*, the antagonistically characterized setting, the claustrophobic, grey, decaying atmosphere, the word choice, the symmetry of the twins, established through characterization aid and enhance the portrayal of the central theme, death. In *The Cask of Amontillado*, the ironic and sarcastic mood, the metaphors, the negative symmetry achieved through characterization and syntax assist the portrayal of death. Thus, both stories demonstrate how Poe uses multiple literary devices and techniques to advance the portrayal of central themes. Thematically, *The House of Usher* displays a philosophical and psychological function of death, dealing with egos of a personality, the thin line between life

and death; love and hate. *The Cask of Amontillado* displays a social and critical function of death, showing the evaluation of the lack of lawful means of retribution, of punishment of an immoral and unethical murder and the slay of conscience.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *The Birthmark*, displays an overly confident scientific experiment done in the quest for perfection that results in the tragic death of a beautiful young woman. Death in *The Birthmark* is portrayed through the two main characters, Aylmer and Georgiana. Aylmer is characterized as an enthusiastic scientist with a thirst for scientific inquiry, thus symbolizing intellect and science. Aylmer's excessive enthusiasm towards scientific experiments depicts his superhuman will to control nature, symbolized by the birthmark on the cheek of Georgiana, and his lack of respect for man's life exemplified through an elixir he created, aimed at killing humans. Contrastingly, Georgiana is described as a beautiful young woman who portrays the characteristics of an ideal wife of the bygone era, as she presents absolute allegiance to her husband by jeopardizing her life for his happiness. Still, Georgiana is not characterized as blindly dependent on her husband since she's aware of the possibly lethal outcome of the experiment and confronts her husband about the risks involved and demands the truth; 'you mistrust your wife; you have concealed the anxiety with which you watch the development of this experiment'. Her speculative approach to her husband's experiment foreshadows the tragic outcome of Aylmer's experiment, her death. Georgiana, therefore, is characterized as a loyal but perceptive and knowledgeable woman. She approaches death with absolute understanding, qualifying her death as a consequence of a hazardous scientific experiment. Thus, death is portrayed as a natural consequence of humankind's investigations, which oppose the natural order of the universe, conveyed through Georgiana's attitude towards her death.

Hawthorne makes use of conspicuous foreshadowing throughout the story, which prompts the audience to speculate about Aylmer and implies the likely failure of the experiment.

For instance, while Georgiana skims through his book of past experiments, she realizes that even ‘his splendid successes were almost invariably failures’. The blatant foreshadowing throughout the story builds the readers’ apprehension towards the experiment and thus Georgiana’s death, and emphasizes Georgiana’s bravery. Furthermore, death isn’t portrayed as the climax of the story, but a predicted outcome of scientific inquiry.

The third person omniscient narration of the story displays a biased point of view, characterizing the narrator as a moralist. This is exemplified in the depiction of the contrasting image of the red and white colouring on Georgiana’s face due to the birthmark, described as having ‘a tint of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness’. The positive word choice used reveals that the narrator is not opposed to the birthmark, but rather fond of it. Since the birthmark is the reason of Georgiana’s death, the biased description of the birthmark also leads to a biased portrayal of death. Therefore, the reader is prompted to hold Aylmer guilty of his wife’s death. Hence, the quest for scientific inquiry represented by Aylmer, when in opposition with natural order, is portrayed as an unfavourable path which results in collateral damage.

Aylmer’s quest in eliminating the birthmark could be interpreted as him striving for perfection. Georgiana’s death exhibits the foolishness of striving for perfection, since perfection, according to Hawthorne, cannot exist amongst humans. Therefore, once Aylmer removes the birthmark, he creates an ideal, ‘perfect’ being that cannot exist in this world, thus Georgiana dies. Aylmer’s attempt at removing the birthmark depicts the battle between nature and man, and Georgiana’s death shows the ultimate power of nature over man. Furthermore, death serves as the price which Aylmer pays for his quest for scientific inquiry to overpower nature. Hawthorne also uses death to criticize the husband and wife’s relationship and its dynamics. Despite Georgiana’s intellectual strength, being the wife of a reckless scientist, she is forced to subside to her husband’s selfish and irrational quest for perfection. The

consequences which Georgiana faces for her husband's happiness is her striking and unfair death. By characterizing Georgiana as exceedingly selfless and plotting her death as unnecessary, Hawthorne uses death to comment on the social structure present in the nineteenth century.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *Ethan Brand*, portrays the moral and psychological state of a man who has spent eighteen years searching for the sin unforgivable by God. Death within the context of the story is mainly portrayed as a result of or sacrifice for the unpardonable sin and is associated with fire, burning and fiends. Ethan Brand is characterized as a mysterious man from Massachusetts, motivated strongly and primarily by his intellect, which results in him destroying both his own soul and others'. Ethan Brand's surname displays Hawthorne's word choice. The definition of brand is 'a burning or partly burned piece of wood', 'any mark of disgrace' and 'a mark formerly put upon criminals with a hot iron'. Ethan Brand is depicted with a metaphorical burning desire for the unholy, and encounters the fate of burning to death. Furthermore, Ethan Brand could be thought of as a criminal of moral and ethical law, carrying the burden and disgrace of committing the unpardonable sin. Therefore, Ethan Brand's name alludes to his mentality, the portrayal of his death and the themes of the story.

Hawthorne narrates the story in omniscient third person point of view, thus accessing his character's thoughts and emotions which aid in portraying the incidents in the story. Hawthorne characterizes Joe as an innocent, emotional, loving boy whose sympathetic point of view is used when describing Ethan's death, 'tears came into his eyes, for his tender spirit had an intuition of the bleak and terrible loneliness in which the man had enveloped himself'. Through the emotive portrayal of Ethan's death, the audience sympathizes and discovers the reasons behind Ethan's suicide, namely excessive loneliness and alienation. Humphery's daughter's death is also portrayed through the narrator's subjective point of view and emotive tone, 'the Esther of our tale, the girl whom, with such cold and remorseless purpose, Ethan Brand had

made the subject of a psychological experiment, and wasted, absorbed and perhaps annihilated her soul, in the process.’ The specific choice of the words ‘absorbed’, ‘wasted’ and ‘annihilated’ portray the cruelty of the murder exhibited by Ethan Brand, therefore portraying death in a tragic manner. This portrayal compliments the function of death, conveying the dramatic and tragic consequences of Ethan’s search for the unpardonable sin.

Fire, a repeated motif and symbol, also associated with Ethan’s name, symbolizes humankind’s passion and obsession. Ethan displays an obsessive nature towards sinful acts and celestial beings. His passion eventually leads to his alienation from society, which causes his soul to grow agitated resulting in suicide. Thus, fire is portrayed as the cause of Ethan Brand’s death, both metaphorically and literally. Fire, as a motif, is firstly portrayed in relation to Ethan’s previous occupation, tending the fire of the kiln. Hence, Ethan was familiar with the feverous temperature, the fire, and the fiend-like drawings on the walls of the kiln, an environment closely related to hell, where one is said to pay for one’s sins. Therefore, Ethan’s curiosity towards finding the unpardonable sin may stem from the central position of fire in his life. Hawthorne, describes the villagers, the successful doctor and lawyer as heavy drinkers, who have hindered their relationships, career and lives with ‘black bottles of ‘fiery liquors’. Hence, fire is used as a motif in connotation with the cause of sin, in this case, the fiery liquor which kindles alcoholism. Fire is thus qualified as a phenomenon of temptation, which provokes people to commit sins. While Ethan is tempted to search for the unpardonable sin, the villagers portray a more relatable temptation, the ‘fiery liquor’ which causes them to hinder their career and relationships. Therefore, death is portrayed as a result of sinful temptations in connotation with fire as a motif and symbol. Marble acts as a symbol and the outcome of the portrayal of Ethan’s death. As Ethan’s corpse burns, the remains are described with imagery, juxtaposing the blackness of the ash and the paleness of the marble symbolizing the sternness and coldness of the human heart proceeding suicide and the reflection of the emotional toll of

Ethan's quest for the unpardonable sin. Thus marble, a metaphor for Ethan's death, portrays the price one pays for the quest for knowledge, the sternness and coldness of the soul.

The short story, *Ethan Brand*, displays an upright, proper man who transforms into a work of the devil due to the singular enslaving question regarding what the unpardonable sin is. Ethan Brand's obsession with this question conveys the thirst for knowledge, yet during the path to knowledge, Ethan manipulates and deceives others into committing sinful acts and sacrifices innocent lives, thus portraying his quest for knowledge as inordinate. The ultimate death of Ethan Brand and the murder of Humphry's daughter represent the horrifying consequences of an inordinate thirst for knowledge. Consequently, Ethan represents the attitude of scientists who seek answers without considering the morality of their actions. The striking description of **Humphry's daughter's** death criticizes the cold objective and at times unethical attitude of scientists and scientific research. With respect to Ethan, the sin he committed, deliberately causing others to sin, could be interpreted as the unpardonable sin and its consequences, his absolute alienation from society, the severance of his ties with humanity and excessive loneliness which causes him great despair resulting in his suicide by burning alive.

Contextually both *The Birthmark* and *Ethan Brand* portray the price individuals pay for the quest for knowledge. However, *The Birthmark* tackles a scientific understanding of knowledge, whereas *Ethan Brand* tackles a religious and philosophical approach, therefore conveying diverging consequences. *The Birthmark* conveys the superiority of nature over man and the price one pays for attempting to dominate nature and the natural order of life depicted through Georgiana's death. In *The Birthmark*, Hawthorne also deals with women's role in society and the subservience of women in marriage, thus affixing a critical tone to the story and developing the story as one of social significance. However, *Ethan Brand* deals with inner conflicts, the temptation to immerse oneself in sins and the price one pays for giving into temptation and committing sins often alluding to religious references and imagery. Both short

stories make use of a symbolic language when portraying the causes and function of death, the most central symbols being the birthmark in *The Birthmark* and fire in *Ethan Brand*. However, the portrayal of death differs in the sense that, death in *The Birthmark* is foreshadowed repeatedly, thus creating apprehension, yet death in *Ethan Brand* is not directly portrayed or foreshadowed, but rather conveyed to the reader succeeding the actual time of death, affixing an abrupt unexpectedness to the deaths and therefore portraying the deaths as tragic.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The subject of death in the short stories by Edgar Allan Poe is portrayed through the artistic use of language, the symmetry and negative symmetry amongst characters illustrating the egos of a personality and the depiction of the setting and atmosphere with the use of imagery paired with symbolic elements. Hence, the portrayal of death within Poe's short stories is achieved mainly through the unity of effect, making use of all structural and contextual aspects of a story by affixing symbolic meanings. Hawthorne, on the other hand, portrays death through subjective narration when alluding to his critical and/or personal claims regarding the context of his short stories, also making use of symbolic elements and motifs when portraying death. In comparison, Poe depicts a more artistic use of language when portraying death, which makes the setting and atmosphere of his stories highly visual, symbolic and even surreal at times. Hawthorne, however, depicts a more realistic form of reality, setting, atmosphere and therefore death compared to Poe. Contextually, Poe uses death to refer to the philosophical order of life and the psychological state of the individual, thus death functions as the portrayal of abstract concepts, such as the desire for revenge, the analogy between love and hate and the path between life and death. In comparison, Hawthorne uses death to portray and at times comment upon and scrutinize human nature, social norms, myths and the concept of religion therefore addressing the social structure present during the time in which the short stories were written.

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