

**The Vertical Structure and Symbolic Inversion
in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe**

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Abstract

The motif of “rise” and “fall” is always at issue in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. The imagery of “falling,” as it can be seen in titles such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Descent into the Maelström,” characterizes Poe’s corpus. The imagery of “rising” also frequently appears in Poe’s works. For example, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” features an orangutan that climbs up a building in central Paris, and in “The Gold-Bug,” Jupiter clammers up a huge tulip-tree. These upward and downward movements are naturally linked with the construction of narrative space. For example, in “William Wilson,” the Elizabethan house where the narrator spent his school-life has a vertical inner construction: “From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent.” In this manner, the narrative space of Poe’s fiction is often organized vertically, and things and characters physically move along the vertical axis and trade positions in several situations; in other words, an inversion of “high” and “low” occurs in the narrative. This dissertation

examines how Poe establishes the vertical structure in narrative space and analyzes the essence of his literature in terms of symbolic inversion.

In the chapters of this dissertation, I attempt to deal with Poe's works in chronological order of publication to some degree. Chapter 1 especially focuses on the five tales which Poe published in the earliest phase of his career. After publishing three volumes of poetry, Poe began his career as a writer of short fiction in 1831. He submitted five tales to a literary competition sponsored by the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, which included "Metzengerstein," "Loss of Breath" (originally, "A Decided Loss"), "The Doc de L'Omelette," "Bon-Bon" (originally, "The Bargain Lost"), and "A Tale of Jerusalem." Although none of these pieces won the prize, but all the tales were published in the magazine in 1832. Chapter 1 explores these tales in terms of vertical structure. It demonstrates that Poe had already used the technique of symbolic inversion in the five tales. Poe especially focuses on the epistemological frame of European culture, in other words, the symbolic categories of "high" and "low." The structure of narrative space is organized vertically, and it is associated with various kinds of binary opposition which have been forming European worldview, such as mind(head)/body, human/animal, and the West/the East. The narrative space of above five tales reflects those oppositions, and Poe overturns the basis of European culture by using symbolic inversion.

While Chapter 1 discusses Poe's intention to overturn the basis of the Western culture, Chapter 2, by contrast, focuses on his attitude toward American culture in the early 19th century. It discusses Poe's activities in the middle phase of his career in terms of the cultural hierarchy. The

historian, Lawrence W. Levine, in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, argues that for most of the 19th century the high/low opposition between cultures had not yet fully formed and a wide variety of art forms enjoyed both high cultural status and mass popularity. According to Levine, the chasm between “high” and “low,” “serious” and “popular,” was gradually growing during the latter half of the 19th century. His argument is based on his study of wide range of popular culture in the whole of 19th century America, and therefore it is entirely convincing; however, it seems obvious that Poe had already recognized the hierarchy of cultures in the early 19th century, and, moreover, he utilized it as the background of his tales. The years from the mid-1830s to the early 1840s, when Poe worked actively as both a fiction writer and a magazine editor, marked the rise of Transcendentalism. During that period, the northern intellectuals and philosophers who advocated Transcendentalism exerted substantial influence. In addition, blackface minstrelsy, a popular American form of entertainment in the 19th century, developed during the same period. The popular culture offered much amusement, mainly to the working class. In Poe’s perspective, Transcendentalism and blackface minstrelsy formed the hierarchy of highbrow/lowbrow, and he turned this contemporary cultural hierarchy upside down in his tales. It is possible to point out such cultural influences on “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” and “The Gold-Bug.” Focusing on the two tales, Chapter 2 explores the inversion of cultural hierarchy within the vertical structure.

Chapter 3 considers the motif of “lying” as the motion of descending in the poems and stories of the genre “the death of a beautiful woman.” In

the critical history, the phrase “the death of a beautiful woman” has been considered as a name of a literary genre. In “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe used this phrase to explain about “the most poetic topic in the world,” but the scholar has applied the name to his short stories, too. *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Stuart and Susan Levine, includes “The Oval Portrait,” “Morella,” “Berenice,” “Eleonora,” “Ligeia,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” in this genre. This Chapter examines “Annabel Lee,” “The Raven,” “Berenice,” “Morella,” “Ligeia,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In these works of “the death of a beautiful woman,” the motif of “lying,” the motion of descending, not only signifies the state of “sleeping” but also suggests “death” or “sexual union.” The posture that these three states have in common causes serious confusions in the narrative. In other words, “sleeping,” “death,” and “sexual union” become muddled in the drama of “the death of a beautiful woman.” The lyric poems that address this theme express man’s melancholy and unfulfilled desire for his lover who sleeps underground. On the other hand, in the tales, the women who lie in their graves return to the earth and destroy men’s self-sufficient identity. Thus, Chapter 3 demonstrates that Poe subverts the male-centered worldview in the works of “the death of a beautiful woman.”

Poe’s urban fiction also emerges from his concern about verticality. Chapter 4 examines this genre in terms of vertical structure, newly dealing with horizontality as opposed to verticality. The problems of Poe’s urban fiction cannot be interpreted solely using vertical structure and inversion as in the previous three chapters. In the modern era, particularly in the early 19th century in the United States, science spread rapidly and people became

more rationalistic in spirit. As a result, people came to have little faith in religious and spiritual matters. As minds grew more rationalistic, unearthly presences such as gods and devils became less meaningful for them. In other words, scientific rationalism rejected religious beliefs based on a vertical worldview that is composed of heaven, earth, and hell. Instead, the realities of ordinary life on the surface of the earth began to be at issue. Following this paradigm shift, in Poe's urban fiction, the surface of the ground is revealed as the suitable locus for the modern world. Furthermore, the basic axis of the narrative space shifts from verticality to horizontality, and the motion of "circulation," instead of "inversion," becomes significant. This chapter attempts to demonstrate how Poe arrived at the radical shift after his long use of symbolic inversion.