The Horrors of Capital: Violence and Commodities in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to my cat, Siouxsie, a monstrous presence for whom I would commit extreme acts of violence. May you always haunt me.

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Abstract

This paper analyzes four of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "Berenice," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse," in which a first-person narrator commits acts of violence against others. This paper argues that the similarities between the use of gothic tropes in both Poe and Marx demonstrate the potential for these tropes to capture the violent nature of capitalism, as they reveal the capitalist motives behind violent crimes. In “Berenicë,” for example, a wealthy man demonstrates the violent consequences of the constant hunger for more and more capital with his obsession over and ultimate removal of his fiancée's teeth. In “The Tell-Tale Heart” a man kills his paternal figure in a desperate attempt to gain property. In “The Black Cat” the narrator violently exercises power over others in an exploration of domestic politics and slavery. Finally, in “The Imp of the Perverse” Poe explores the pressures of the capitalist publishing industry. Analyzed chronologically by publication, the narrators of these stories grow increasingly aware of the influence of capitalism on their violent behavior, and by the final story the narrator struggles with the self-awareness that his predecessors lacked.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In his horror stores, Edgar Allan Poe explores themes of depravity, obsession, and power. Those stories which offer the most grotesque visions of frenzy are those told from the perspective of a narrator who commits an act of violence. This paper will focus on four of these stories, "Berenicë," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse," and situate their representations of frenzied violence within the economic panic of the nineteenth century. I will be studying these stories chronologically by publication date, beginning with "Berenicë" and ending with "The Imp of the Perverse," to demonstrate the development of Poe's depictions of panicked violence throughout his career. This paper will analyze the underlying motives and causes of the narrators' violence and argue that they are rooted in the demands of capitalism, directly relating to the desire to accumulate capital. Several scholars have made connections between the writings of Karl Marx and Gothic horror stories. For example, Gail Turley Houston emphasizes the significance of panic in the Victorian economy, citing Walter Bagehot who in 1864 declared "'panic' has become virtually an economic term" (1), and she argues that "Gothic tropes register, manage, and assess the intense panic produced and elided by the unstable Victorian economy" (1). Fred Botting similarly argues that "Marx's metaphors push monstrosity to its limit to frame capital's exploitation of all bodies and values in terms of the utmost horror" (243). Both Houston and Botting make strong connections between the supernatural monsters in Gothic literature and Marx's descriptions of capital as "vampire-like." In *Capital*, for example, he notes that capitalists are "sucking living labour" (342), and his description of a capitalist economic state is one in which one is prey under a vampiric force, fearful and paranoid. Houston and Beer also

cite Marx and Engels' famous proclamation that "a spectre is haunting Europe" (*Manifesto of the Communist Party* 14), and they argue that this spectre is part of a "mutual haunting of Communism and capitalism on a spectacular global scale" (35). These scholars thus primarily relate Marx's language to the supernatural monsters of the Gothic.

While this paper will not be arguing that Poe was directly influenced by Marx's works, it will note the similar uses of Gothic tropes between both authors to argue that Poe's stories serve to critique capitalist violence. With a continued emphasis on the fear and panic of the nineteenth century, this paper will move away from supernatural monsters and focus on the frenzied human violence of Poe's horror stories. Heinz Tschachler makes a strong case for reading Poe's works in relation to his economic climate, describing the author as "an obsessive… student of the acrimonious debates about America's money" (1). The scholar traces Poe's economic influences over the course of his life, from his upbringing with John Allan, "a merchant and one-time director of the Bank of Virginia who necessarily was observant of the debates over national monetary policy and banking" (9), to "Andrew Jackson's 'bank war,' the panic of 1837 and the ensuing depression, and the nation's inability to furnish a 'sound and uniform currency'" (1). Poe's upbringing in the Allan household, his own economic struggles and the unstable economic climate surrounding him present grounds for understanding Poe's writing in relation to economic politics. Tschachler's analysis relies heavily on "The Gold Bug," a story he argues deals with anxieties around the introduction of paper money. Scholars writing about Poe's more violent stories generally move away from the economic discussion of his work and focus on psychoanalysis, with the exception of

scholars including Joan Dayan and Lesley Ginsberg who draw connections between Poe's works and the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade. I aim to build upon this scholarship by introducing those conversations about Poe's depiction of slavery to a broader conversation about his representation of the horrors of capitalism. This paper will analyze the violent crimes in each of the selected stories, as well as their motivations and what material goods the narrator gained from his violence to argue that the violence in these stories is driven by capitalist demand. In each of these stories, Poe uses gothic tropes to identify violence as an inevitable consequence of capitalism. Through a chronological analysis of these stories, this paper will show how the narrators become more and more aware of the true motivations for their crimes. In "Berenicë" our narrator truly believes himself to be haunted and does not even remember committing his crime. Next, in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," caught criminals attempt to conceal their true motives by telling stories of supernatural forces. Finally, by "The Imp of the Perverse," our narrator is fully aware of the capitalist forces driving his actions and struggles to continue to participate in the capitalist publishing industry with his newfound awareness.

Chapter 2: "Berenicë"

The first story I will be focusing on is "Berenicë," first published in 1835. This story is narrated by Egæus, who as editor Thomas Ollive Mabbot states, was named after Hermia's father in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a character who "failed to understand love" (208). Egæus is preoccupied with things, a disorder he self-diagnoses as "monomania." The character describes his monomania as "undue, earnest, and morbi[d] attention thus excited by objects in their own nature frivolous" (212). Egæus' monomania has horrific consequences for his bride-to-be, his cousin Berenicë. As Berenicë succumbs to illness, her receding face exposes her unchanged, shining white teeth, the new object of Egæus' fixation. The story culminates in Egæus pulling the teeth from the still-living Berenicë's head while he is in a trance-like state. The story of Berenicë demonstrates the grave consequences of Marx's foretold "unreserved surrender to things" (qtd. in Botting 245).

Egæus' violent act is fueled by an urgent desire to accumulate capital. However, he does not understand this urge and mistakes his violent behavior as the result of both mental illness and vampiric forces. Egæus describes his family's wealth, expressing displeasure at the level of luxury to which he is accustomed. The narrator describes his "family mansion," the "frescoes of the chief saloon," "tapestries of the dormitories," "chiseling of some buttresses in the armour," the "gallery of antique paintings," and lastly the "library chamber" where he spends most of his days" (209). He goes to great length to list his possessions, introducing the reader to his tendency to obsess over property. Despite the grandeur of his ancestral home, Egæus complains that his home is "gloomy" and "gray" (209). Egæus is discontented in his family mansion; despite his position of

luxury and wealth he finds that a "stagnation there fell upon the springs of my life" (210). Egæus' property allows him the luxury of boredom, amplifying his desire to accumulate and obsess over objects. Egæus' introduction immediately establishes him as a member of the bourgeoisie, as defined by Marx. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels describe "everlasting uncertainty and agitation" as the feature which distinguishes "the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones" (16). For Marx, this agitation is rooted in the constant developments in industries and instruments of production. Egæus' uncertainty is similarly rooted in his perceived need to be constantly increasing his holdings, causing him to frantically seek out new forms of capital. Egæus is also established to be from a landowning family; he tells the reader of his wealth and property, yet just as Marx describes he is stricken with uncertainty and agitation.

Egæus' cousin, Berenicë, is initially different to Egæus in every way. While Egæus is "ill of health and buried in gloom," Berenicë is "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy" (210). Berenicë quickly succumbs to illness, however, being struck by a "fatal disease… the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits and her character" until the narrator "knew her no longer as Berenicë!" (211). Berenicë's symptoms are vague, though emphasis is placed on the "startling changes" the character undergoes (210). In addition to her physical changes, Berenicë is prone to a "species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in trance itself" (211). It is Berenicë's illness that triggers Egæus, who had "surely… never loved her" (214), to become fixated on Berenicë. Berenicë's illness and resulting prominence of her teeth cause Egæus' fixation, which grows ferociously as she gets more ill. Egæus describes Berenicë in a way that is both passionate and disconnected from her entirely. Egæus makes several

exclamations about Berenicë's teeth, proclaiming "Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that having done so I had died!" and "the teeth! – the teeth! They were here, and there, and everywhere" (215). By referring to Berenicë's teeth only as "the teeth," Egæus effectively reduces her personhood to a material object that he can keep in his possession in a small tin. By the end of the story, Berenicë is one of Egæus' many possessions, an object of his fixation. This clearly shows that he views the world exclusively in terms of things he can own, which is established by his fixation on describing his family home, his list of objects, and his reduction of Berenicë from a person to a tin containing "thirty-two, small, white, and ivory-looking substances" (219).

Describing her teeth as "ivory-looking" also invokes the ivory trade and, in turn, colonialism. Marx and Engels directly tied colonial ventures to the growth of capitalism, stating "[t]he discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie" (*Manifesto* 15). Egæus' quest for ivory thus mirrors other violent expeditions in the name of capitalism. The depiction of the teeth as a commodity worth committing acts of violence for is also strengthened by the history of buying and selling teeth in Virginia, where Poe wrote the story. Mary V. Thompson tells of George Washington, who "paid several unnamed 'Negroes,' presumably Mount Vernon slaves, 122 shillings for 9 teeth, slightly less than one-third the going rate advertised in the papers" (135). The scholar explains that "a perfectly acceptable means of making money was by selling teeth to dentists," and teeth "might even be taken from corpses" (135). Egæus' commodification of Berenicë's body functions both by comparing her teeth to the prizes of colonial conquest in Africa and invoking imagery of the very real and present practice of buying and selling human teeth.

Egæus' felt ownership over his cousin/fiancée, of course, has broader implications in terms of the economic position of women in the nineteenth century. Richard H. Chused reminds us that in the first half of the nineteenth century "[p]ersonal property of a wife became the property of her husband" (1361), and Egæus' removal of his wife's teeth mirrors the transfer of property from wife to husband. Marx and Engels also warn about the power of men over their wives under capitalism, stating "The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited" (*Manifesto* 25). Nineteenth century law thus grants Egæus power over Berenicë and ownership of her property, which makes his violent act of taking her teeth possible. However, this raises the question of why Egæus commits such an extreme act if he will already gain agency over Berenicë once they are married.

I will return to the scene of Berenicë's dental extraction later in this section, but for now I would like to focus on the frenzy and paranoia that led to it. Egæus clearly fetishizes Berenicë's teeth, which drives him further to the edge of depravity. Louise Green describes fetishism as "a practice of assigning value, which, within any given regime of value, is excessive" (304). She explains that "[f]or Marx, the act of displacement occurs when the exchange value of commodities appears as the real and inherent value of the objects themselves… Abstract value generated by the process of exchange" (307). Egæus similarly prizes Berenicë's teeth beyond reasonable understanding, and his desire to collect them is fuelled by the capitalist demand to always be growing and acquiring capital. Egæus is haunted by the "white and ghastly spectrum of the teeth" (215); "spectrum" here refers to a "spectre," an "apparition or phantom"

("Spectrum, n"). Berenicë's teeth become "phantasma" that Egæus longs for "with a frenzied desire" (215).

With the haunting spectre of the teeth comes Egæus' fear of Berenicë, as he begins to feel that she too is haunting him. At two different points in the story, Egæus recalls being surprised to lift his head and find Berenicë had entered the library without him realizing. He begins to describe Berenicë's presence in the home as otherworldly. The first time Berenicë appears in the library Egæus wonders, "[w]as it my own excited imagination – or the misty influence of the atmosphere – or the twilight of the chamber – or the gray draperies which fell around her figure – that caused in it so vacillating and indistinct an outline?" (214). Berenicë thus appears as an apparition, which causes Egæus to question his sanity, and he soon begins to fear her, in one instance feeling an "icy chill [run] through my frame; a sense of insufferable anxiety oppressed me" (214). Madeleine A. Vala explains the significance of hauntings in understanding anxieties around land ownership. The scholar explains that when "ghosts inhabit houses, the current resident's status as the owner is threatened, and the property fails to signify power" (26-27). Berenicë haunting Egæus' home similarly threatens his status as the property owner. This story was also written around the time of legal changes surrounding women's right to own property in the United States. Chused describes 1835, the year this story was published, as being a significant year for these changes, stating "[b]eginning in 1835, states began to alter the common law rules granting husbands management and control of their wives' real estate and ownership of their private property" (1359). This story was published at a time when husbands' ownership over their wives' property was beginning to waver, providing a potential cause for Egæus' anxiety, as his fears about his fiancée's

otherworldly appearance demonstrates anxieties around his absorption of her property upon marriage.

Aspasia Stephanou also likens Berenicë's symptoms to tuberculosis, or consumption (36), which was characterized by the "wasting and eating of the body as a result of loss of humors" (36), and she links the appearance of consumption to literature on vampires, stating "Vampires… became a fitting metaphor for the disintegration of the tubercular female body" due to the physical changes it brought those affected by the illness. (37). Berenicë's "very pale… singularly placid" forehead with "hollow temples" and a "reigning melancholy of countenance" thus reflects both writings on tuberculosis symptoms and vampire stories, and various arguments have been made about the use of vampirism in "Berenicë." For example, James B. Twitchell describes the story as a "rather clumsy attempt to incorporate the vampire into a tale" and claims that "Poe's concern was "exploiting real historical events (graverobbing in Baltimore)" (qtd. in Blyth and Sweet). Hal Blyth and Charlie Sweet, meanwhile, suggest that Poe's use of vampirism is satiric, claiming "[w]hile Egæus' vision of Berenicë images her in increasingly vampiristic terms, Poe seems to mock this framework by closing his tale with an absurd twist on the vampire legend." I would like to suggest that Poe's take on the vampire in "Berenicë" is not merely clumsy or satirical; rather, it is a reflection on paranoia in a state of economic panic, as Egæus identifies Berenicë as the source of his anxiety, threatening to feed on him and his precious collection of objects due to changing laws, which could challenge his ownership over his wife's property. Berenicë is not a vampire, to be clear, but an unfortunate woman subjected to the panicked violence of her

fiancée's paranoid state. Nonetheless, Egæus' paranoia causes him to view her as monstrous.

Despite showing the characteristics associated with vampirism, however, Berenicë is ultimately the consumed rather than the consumer. This brings us to the aforementioned dental extraction. The most common publication of this story has a portion of the penultimate night removed, in which Egæus discovers before Berenicë's burial that she is alive. I will begin by discussing the more common, edited, version of the story before discussing the original. In this edited version of the story, the narrator jumps from a memory of being informed of Berenicë's death and impending burial to awakening in his library, with clothes "muddy and clotted with gore" (218). Egæus has no memory of the act and feels as though he has "newly awakened from a confused and exciting dream" (217). Egæus' excitement is mixed with panic, and his "horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity" (217). It is only upon finding a dirty spade and tin of Berenicë's teeth that Egæus realizes what he has done, and his horror is made even worse with the news that Berenicë is "still alive!" (218). This edited version leaves open more possibilities surrounding the state of Berenicë's aliveness. Was she alive when she was buried? When Egæus exhumed her? When he pulled her teeth? Is it possible, perhaps, that she was truly undead? Just as Egæus felt that night, our horror is more horrible from being vague. This ending leaves Berenicë's mortality to the reader's interpretation. Egæus performs what Staci Poston Conner describes as a "defanging" (83), either removing the teeth of a vampire or a very ill woman. The original version removes this ambiguity, as Berenicë was explicitly buried alive. In the removed portion of the story, for example, Egæus visits Berenicë's body

before her burial and is shocked to see first her finger move, then her smile. Egæus "utter[s] no word" and runs from the room (fn. P, 217). Berenicë is then buried as scheduled. In this, the original version of the story, Egæus realizes that Berenicë is still alive before she is buried, and he acts out of fear, allowing the burial to happen.

Egæus' retrieval of Berenicë's body seems to be motivated by two things, the first being the retrieval of the precious objects of his desire, and the other being to rid himself of a vampire through the removal of her fangs. Egæus' gruesome act of violence against his fiancée is also fueled by capitalist demand. He displays a discontentedness Marx describes as characteristic of the bourgeoisie, never satisfied with his wealth and belongings. The narrator's future marriage to Berenicë will likely entitle him to her property, but the changing political climate causes him to feel anxiety at the potential for him to lose some of his ownership. Yet, there is a part of Berenicë that has remained commodifiable: her teeth. Berenicë's teeth, which invoke images of the violent ivory trade and the trade of human teeth, haunt Egæus. He becomes so fixated on her teeth that he pulls them from her head. Despite his power over her, Egæus grows to fear his fiancée, experiencing her present in the home as monstrous. Again, mirroring Marx's description of a capitalist world, Egæus does not view his wife as human, and his de-humanization of her is key to his violent acts in the pursuit of capitalist growth.

Despite his fears surrounding his wife, Egæus is ultimately the true vampire of the story, extracting value from Berenicë's body just as capitalists extract value from the bodies of labourers. In this, our first story, the narrator is largely unaware of the motivations behind his actions, and his judgement is clouded by greed and paranoia. Understanding his urge to obsess over objects as monomania rather than greed, and his

fiancée as a vampire rather than a victim to his exploitation, Egæus is an unknowing agent of capitalist violence.

Chapter 3: "The Tell-Tale Heart"

The next story in this study is one of Poe's most well known, "The Tell-Tale Heart." Published in 1843, the story was largely inspired by ongoing criminal trials. Poe was exposed to the discourse surrounding the still new insanity defense, an example being the 1843 "reason-of-moral-insanity trial of James Woods," for which Poe was a trial reporter (Bynum 145). Mabbott also claims that the primary inspiration for this story was the murder of Joseph White in Salem, Massachusetts. As Mabbott writes, "John Francis Knapp employed Richard Crowninshield, Jr… to rob and kill Joseph White" (789), and attorney Daniel Webster's speech about the crime described how "[a]n aged man, without an enemy in the world, in his own house, and in his own bed, is made the victim of a butcherly murder, for mere pay" (qtd. in Mabbott 790). Public murder trials, such as these, would have been recognizable to Poe's readers, who would have had "a knowledge of a controversial new disease called 'moral insanity'" (Bynum 141).

Poe mirrors such cases in his story, which details the murder of a man by an unnamed narrator who shares his home, as well as his ultimate confession of his crime to the police. Throughout the story Poe's narrator insists upon his sanity, describing the precision with which he committed his crime. In the opening paragraph, for example, the narrator implores the reader to "observe how healthily – how calmy I can tell you the whole story" (792). The narrator also gloats about his actions, claiming "[n]ever, before that night, had I felt the extent of my own powers – of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph" (793). The word triumph here is particularly telling, because it demonstrates the way in which the narrator sees himself as having conquered the old man's position. Despite his refusal to acknowledge his true motives, however, the

narrator reveals himself to have been seeking a higher position of social power through the murder of the old man, as his violence makes him feel a sense of power over others, a power essential to capitalist growth.

Like the narrator, the victim of the story remains nameless. Referred to as "the old man," the relationship between the victim and his murderer remains unclear. It is established that the narrator and the old man lived together, as the narrator describes visiting the man's room every night while he slept. Several scholars, including Marie Bonaparte, have read the relationship as paternal, suggesting the old man was the narrator's father. Mabbott, however, claims that this cannot be the case. The narrator states that during the day he treated the old man as usual, "calling him by name" (793). Mabbott claims that this mention disproves the notion that the man is the narrator's father, because "[a] century ago, children did not address parents by name" (798). I would like to argue against the certainty with which Mabbott claims that "the crime was not parricide" (798), on the basis that Marx describes the breaking of familial bonds as a consequence of capitalism. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels write "[t]he bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family to a mere money relation" (16). Were the old man the narrator's father, the fact that he calls him by name could be a reflection of the tearing of the sentimental veil from family that Marx describes. I would also like to suggest an alternative relationship between the two. As stated earlier in this paper, Poe lived with merchant John Allan for much of his upbringing. Janie Hinds writes about the troubled relationship between Poe and his foster father, referencing an 1827 letter in which "Poe angrily lashed out at the perceived injustices he suffered at Allan's hands" (119). I do not

mean to imply that "The Tell-Tale Heart" imagines Poe's murder of his foster father, or that the man in the story is directly based on Allan; however, it is entirely possible that Poe's story depicts a familial relationship outside of a traditional father-son relationship. Given Poe's troubled relationship with his foster father, it is not unreasonable to assume that Poe's story could depict either a father-son relationship devoid of affection or a paternal relationship between two men who are not biological father and son.

Despite the narrator's emphasis on the detail and skill with which he commits his crime, his motive for murdering the old man also remains unclear. The narrator claims that there was nothing to gain from the crime, stating "[o]bject there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire" (792). The narrator claims that he had no anger or resentment for the man and did not act out of a desire to claim his wealth. In an attempt to rationalize his actions, the narrator states, "I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it" (792). He also describes visiting the old man at around midnight every night, opening his door, and opening a lantern "just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye" (793). The narrator does this for seven nights but is disappointed to find the man's eyes closed. It is not until the eighth night, when he finds the vulture eye open, that the narrator goes through with the murder. The eye is thus an object of fixation for the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," just as Berenicë's teeth became an object of fixation for Egæus, as he claims that he "could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot" (795). In other words, the narrator views the old man not as a paternal figure whom he loves, but rather as an

always watching, preying eye, which represents the power the old man has over him. While he claims that the murder is not driven by the desire for gold, his actions are clearly driven by a desire to break their power dynamics. Slawomir Studniarz similarly claims that the actions of the narrator offer "insight into the modern frame of mind and into the mechanisms underlying the apparatus of a disciplinarian state" (110), and he points specifically to the narrator's nightly visits to the old man's room as an instance of the narrator trying to reverse the power dynamic between himself and the patriarchal figure, writing that the act may "be construed as a prefiguration of a prison guard flashing the torchlight on an inmate" (112). Read in this way, the narrator imitating the act of a prison guard not only imitates the position of power that a prison guard has over a prisoner but also reverses the roles of the surveilled and the surveiller. The murder thus allows the narrator to escape his position of inferiority under the old man and, in turn, establish dominance over him.

Both F. S. Frank and Magdalen Wing-Chi Ki emphasize the independence that the narrator seeks to gain through his riddance of the eye. For example, Ki argues that the narrator "defines himself through the narcissistic eye, the malicious glare, and the enigmatic gaze of the other" (27), and Frank argues that the narrator is desperate for "an identity that is wholly independent of the senses" (53). I would add, however, that the narrator's struggle with identity also illustrates Marx and Engels' assertion that in bourgeois society "capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality" (*Manifesto* 23), as the individual exists only to increase capital. Both the killer and victim of this story are nameless, demonstrating the degree to which they have lost their individuality. The narrator struggles with this loss of

identity, driving him to commit violent actions in the attempt to remove the old man's means of surveillance and control over him. I would argue that this act of violence against one in a position of power represents not a form of revolutionary political action, but rather the violent nature of capitalism itself, the demands of which have driven the narrator mad and reduced him to a nameless agent of capitalist accumulation. His intent is not to overthrow the system, but to acquire the old man's position of power and wealth, and the only way to reach that status is through violence.

In addition to dealing with power dynamics and identity, there is also a supernatural element to the eye in "The Tell-Tale Heart." Mabbott situates this story within a "series of Poe's tales founded on popular superstitions. In this case the Evil Eye" (789), and he suggests that Poe "probably heard of the Eye at first hand while he was stationed at Fort Moultrie in Charleston Harbor, since Negroes in South Carolina… sometimes carry a horse chestnut… as a protection" (789).While there is no evidence in the story to suggest that the old man's eye has any supernatural power or that the narrator was in fact cursed by an evil glare, Poe's invocation of the supernatural as a means for a criminal to defend his violent actions is significant in its relation to Marx's writings on the supernatural. As Vincent Geoghegan reminds us, Marx wrote relatively little on religion, but "the struggle with religion is fundamentally inscribed in the very genesis of his thought" (586). Joseph Blankholm also describes how Marx "reduces [religion] to supernatural belief and predicts its elimination with the end of alienation from labour and the concomitant end of the need for abstraction from material reality" (36). Marx's writings on religion thus describe it as a supernatural belief that allows people to cope with the exploitative conditions of their material reality. This concept is also seen in the

Manifesto of the Communist Party, as Marx and Engels describe "religious and political illusions" as veils for "brutal exploitation" (16). Just as religion can be used as a tool by the bourgeoisie to distract from the exploitative nature of capitalist growth, so too does the narrator use the supernatural story of the evil eye to mask the real power his onlooker has over him, which allows him to avoid responsibility for his crime.

It is not until after the crime that we can decipher what the narrator had to gain from the murder: the house. When police arrive, having been alerted by a neighbour who heard a scream in the night, the narrator acts as host, treating the house as his own. He claims the old man is "absent in the country" (796), demonstrating that it is normal for him to continue to live in the house while the man is gone. The narrator not only presumes ownership of the house but even goes so far as to sit in a chair "upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim" (796). Sitting over the spot of the man's body under the floors that he previously owned is thus a demonstration of victory over the man and his house, which shows that in his move to reverse the power dynamics between him and the man, the narrator intended to claim his property. What prevents the narrator from keeping the man's home is the sound of the man's heartbeat, which only he can hear. The narrator describes his "anxiety" that the sound would cause him to be caught (795), and as he talks with the police the sound of the heartbeat gets "louder! louder! louder! louder!" (797). What is so troubling about the heart is that it threatens the narrator's newly found position, as he is afraid that the police "heard! – they suspected!" (797). The narrator fears the heart will reveal his crime, threatening his new position of power in the old man's absence. Madeline A. Vala connects Gothic stories about haunted houses to tensions over property ownership. The scholar explains that "[w]hen ghosts

inhabit houses, the current resident's status as the owner is threatened, and property fails to signify power" (26-27). Just as ghosts threaten a resident's status as the owner of property in the stories Vala describes, the sound of the old man's heart challenges the killer's new status in the home, threatening to reveal him to the police. The sound of the heart quickly drives the narrator over the edge, demonstrated by his descriptions of having "foamed… raved… swore!" (797). The panic caused by the sound of the heart ultimately forces the narrator to reveal himself to the police, exclaiming "I admit the deed!" (797). The narrator returns to a position of subordination and relinquishes the power he gained from the old man to the police, officers of the capitalist state. The fact that it is to the police that the narrator reveals himself is especially significant due to his imitation of a prison guard to establish dominance over the man before the murder. The role of the police is especially significant because for Marx and Engels the primary role of the police is to protect private property; this creates cause for the narrator's desperation for the police to recognize him as the owner of the property. Even with such extreme actions, the narrator cannot gain the power that he had sought. Marx and Engels wrote that the "bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle" (*Manifesto* 19). Just as the bourgeoisie cannot rid itself of the battle of seeking capitalist growth, the narrator's quest for power and property cannot truly end. He is always engaged in a battle with the capitalist state that both encourages him to commit violence in the name of capital but will not allow him the freedom or independence he was seeking.

A key distinction between this story and its predecessor is the pride the narrator feels after committing his crime. While Egæus admits to feeling some excitement after awakening from the dream state in which he killed his fiancée, this narrator is openly

triumphant after his murder, which clearly illustrates the ruthless nature of capitalist violence. Rather than a narrator who commits his crime unknowingly, this narrator is deliberate and calculated. However, his true motivations remain hidden from himself behind the veil of the supernatural evil eye. The beating heart which results in the narrator's confession reminds him of his subordination to the state, threatening his newfound property ownership in the presence of the police. The gothic tropes in this story thus allow the narrator to understand both his own violent behavior and his subordinate status within the social hierarchy.

Chapter 4: "The Black Cat"

Just months after "The Tell-Tale Heart," Poe released "The Black Cat," another story revolving around a superstition. Like the previous two stories, "The Black Cat" is set in a home, continuing in an exploration of domestic politics. In the opening to this story, the narrator describes it as "the most wild, yet most homely narrative" (849), emphasizing the role of chaos in the home. Furthermore, the narrator claims he will be retelling "a series of mere household events" (849), suggesting the kind of depraved violence this story has to offer is commonplace. Like its predecessor, this story takes the form of a confession, this time the day before the narrator's scheduled execution, and it similarly depicts the consequences of capitalist greed in the domestic sphere, as capitalism grants the narrator power that comes with being upper-class, inheriting a wife's property, and having sovereignty over others' bodies. This story is also the second in this study narrated by an unnamed figure, which shows that our narrators are becoming increasingly impersonal.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator claims that "[f]rom my infancy I was noted for docility and humanity of my disposition" (850). Despite his supposed sensitivity and fondness of animals, however, the narrator grows "day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others" (851). The narrator grows increasingly angry and violent throughout the course of the story, culminating in the murder of his wife. He makes several claims about the cause of his behavior, including alcoholism and supernatural forces, but ultimately cannot hide his true motives. Susan Amper points to inconsistencies in the man's story, which suggest that he is deliberately lying in his confession. For example, the man claims that his wife's body was

found by the police only three days after her death, at which point it was "greatly decayed" (859). Amper claims it is "inconceivable" that the body could have decayed so greatly under the conditions the narrator describes (475). The scholar suggests that "protected from the heat and insects that promote decay… the corpse would have remained in excellent condition, not just for days, but weeks" (477). This is one piece of evidence to suggest that our narrator is unreliable. Amper's exploration of the narrator's claims give the reader cause to doubt his retelling of the account and to search for the true causes of his wife's death.

Unlike the previous two narrators, the narrator of "The Black Cat" has not one but several victims (albeit only one is human). The first victims of our narrator's violence are his animals. The narrator states that, being a lover of animals, he had "a great variety of pets" during his youth (850), and after getting married he and his wife adopted several animals, including a black cat named Pluto. The narrator quickly turned violent against his animals, cutting out Pluto's eye and ultimately hanging him by a noose. Heidi Hanrahan claims that this story was written during "a pivotal moment in the American tradition of animal care, when pets increasingly enjoyed prominent places in households of all classes, but especially those of middle and upper classes or those aspiring to join those classes" (47). In Poe's time, pets were a signifier of class and to have pets was to appear wealthy. This relationship between pet ownership and class immediately opens this story up to a discussion surrounding social status under capitalism, as the narrator's recounting of the pets of his childhood and adulthood indicates that he is a capitalist, as Marx and Engels declared "[t]o be a capitalist is to have… a social status in production" (*Manifesto* 23).

The examination of the relationship between the narrator and his pets also serves as a portrayal of the exploitative practices of the upper class. Lesley Ginsberg suggests, for example, that the violent relationship between the narrator and his black pet serves to explore the relationship between enslaved peoples and slave-owning families, and she points to two major aspects of antebellum proslavery rhetoric to support this claim: the equation of "slaves with animals" (103) and the romanticization of slavery through the "domestic fiction of the happy slaveholding family" (105). Dayan supports Ginsberg's reading on the basis that Poe's work at the *Southern Literary Messenger* was "two blocks away" from "slave auctions," and the author "witnessed the frequent sale of bodies" (409), which gives reason to suspect that the politics of slavery would have been on the author's mind while writing the story. Animals, and more specifically the titular black cat, thus serve not only to represent power as it relates to pet-owning in Antebellum America but also to critique the exploitation of enslaved people by the upper-classes. This focus also mirrors the arguments of Marx and Engels, who described political power as "the organized power of one class for oppressing another" (*Manifesto* 27), and who particularly emphasized the role of slavery within capitalism, stating "the capitalist conception prevails… on American plantations" ("Genesis of Capital Ground Rent"). For both Marx and Poe, therefore, slavery in the United States is a prime example of the atrocities of capitalist violence.

As with "Berenicë," this story also depicts an act of violence to a wife, although this wife does not have a name, making her treatment even less personal. While Egæus's role in Berenicë's death was more passive, with Egæus first ignoring her being alive before her burial and then pulling her teeth from her corpse and leaving her to be found

still alive by a servant, the narrator of this story kills his wife by burying an "axe in her brain" (856), and this woman is again powerless against the violence of her husband. As was stated in previous sections, the narrator's lack of sentimentality is characteristic of Marx's description of domesticity under capitalism, and the result of the breaking of affectionate bonds is violence and oppression from those who hold power in the household.

As was the case with our previous two narrators, the motive for these crimes is not immediately clear. The narrator makes other suggestions to avoid acknowledging the true motive of exercising power over others. The narrator suggests there was no real cause behind his violence towards his animals; he describes Pluto as his "favorite pet and playmate" (850-851). After having "fancied" that Pluto "avoided my presence" (851), the narrator cuts out the cat's eye with a penknife. The narrator gives minor sources of agitation to explain his acts of violence towards his animals, such as his perception that Pluto was avoiding him. For the murder of his wife, he recalls only that she stopped him from killing the second cat. After having been "arrested by the hand of my wife," the narrator goes "into a rage more than demonical" and kills her (856). Again, the narrator's violent reaction is hugely disproportionate to the action which triggered it, and he presents external forces, including alcohol and the supernatural, to avoid responsibility for his actions. For example, the narrator describes himself as inflicted by the "disease" of alcoholism, which "grew upon" him (851), suggesting that it drove him to murder. Once sober, the narrator claims to have felt some remorse for his violent actions while drinking the night before, as he "experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse" (851). In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels similarly describe a day when "all

that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (*Manifesto* 16). Marx and Engels thus describe capitalism as an intoxicating force, which keeps the lower classes from a "sober" state of class consciousness. For the narrator in this story, alcohol is used to represent the intoxicating influence of capitalism, which inspires violence and exploitation.

Alcohol is one way the narrator shifts the blame for his actions away from himself; the next is supernatural forces. As was the case with "The Tell-Tale Heart," supernatural forces are again used to distract from the forces of exploitation in "The Black Cat," as the narrator explains that his wife "made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise" (850). The narrator also makes several claims of being overtaken by supernatural forces, including claiming that the "fury of a demon instantly possessed [him]" while attacking Pluto (851). The narrator also describes unlikely occurrences, such as the apparition of a cat appearing after his house burns down, and the splotch of white on the cat's breast which begins to take the image "of the GALLOWS" (855), mirroring the form of murder the narrator chose for Pluto. However, as Amper reminds us: "Obviously the man is lying" (475). Our narrator is established to be unreliable, and he uses external forces to distract us from the true causes of his violent actions, just as Marx describes these forces as tools of distraction from exploitation. While "The Tell-Tale Heart" depicts the violence of an aspiring capitalist frantically trying to climb the social ladder, this story portrays a narrator already in a position of power exploiting those beneath him. The two stories are nevertheless similar in that the true driving force of the narrator's violence is capitalist

demand, which drives one narrator to violently accumulate capital through inheritance and another through the exploitation of the bodies of those he has power over.

In this tale, the narrator's panic also begins to take a specific form that will continue to take shape in our next story, "The Imp of the Perverse." When hanging Pluto, the narrator describes being overtaken by the "spirit of PERVERSENESS" (852), and the narrator explains that this spirit drives one to commit "vile or a silly action, for no other reason that because he knows he should not" (852). The narrator thus describes how a spirit of perverseness makes him commit acts of violence simply because he knows that he can and because he knows that it is wrong to do so, which is only possible for someone with power over another, such as the power of a pet-owner, a slave owner, or a husband. In other words, the spirit of the perverse is inherently linked to capitalism, as it encourages people to exploit those they have power over.

As with the two previous stories, property is also central to this tale. On the night he murders Pluto, the narrator is "aroused from sleep by the cry of fire… The whole house was blazing" (852). After his house burns down, the narrator states that his "entire worldly wealth was swallowed up" and that as a result he "resigned [himself] thenceforward to despair" (852). The narrator goes into a deep depression after losing his worldly possessions, establishing a tie between his well-being and material wealth. After the fire, the narrator describes living in an "old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit" (856). In their first home, the narrator describes having a "servant" (852), another sign of wealth and social status, which contrasts his situation in the new home. After the fire, the narrator has lost the social status associated with being a wealthy landowner and is desperate to re-establish power over others. Having murdered Pluto, the

narrator looks for a replacement cat and "offered to purchase it off the landlord" (854). The offer of a purchase, from a landlord no less, emphasizes the cat's role as property. Despite having murdered his last cat in a fit of rage, the narrator is quick to replace it so that he can recreate the power he had over Pluto. He recreates this power a second time with the act of murder. It is his frantic need to exercise power over others that leads to the murder of his wife, repeating a cycle of exploitation.

The narrator of "The Black Cat" also uses his confession as an opportunity to evade responsibility for his actions, as he attempts to shift the focus away from the real driving force behind his violence: the seeking of capitalist power. This story thus continues to demonstrate the catastrophic effects of capitalism in the home. Our narrator, impersonal and inhuman, tries to hide behind the influence of alcohol, supernatural entities, and the spirit of the perverse to explain why he committed such acts of violence. Ultimately, as demonstrated by his depression after the fire and his desperation to replace his murdered pet with a new purchase, the narrator's goal is power. He violently exploits those he has power over due to the inherently violent nature of the system which grants him such power.

What separates this narrator from the previous two is his lies. With the inconsistencies in the details surrounding the murders, Poe establishes the narrator as intentionally misleading the audience. Like the previous confession, the narrator uses gothic tropes to hide his true motivations; however, in this instance the supernatural forces are intentionally being used to distract from the driving force of greed. This story thus represents the violence capitalism brings into the domestic sphere and the refusal of the murderer to acknowledge his role in this system.

Chapter 5: "The Imp of the Perverse"

The final story in this study is "The Imp of the Perverse," first published in 1845. This story, as pointed out by Mabbott, is "not one of the most popular" of Poe's works (1217), as it focuses less on the actual crime committed and instead devotes a large introductory section to a reflection on the concept of perversity. Unlike the previous stories, the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" does not try to hide his true motives for having committed his crime, as he explicitly links it to the desire for property. Instead of raising questions about the underlying motive for the murder, the mystery in this story revolves around the motive for the narrator's confession, as the titular malevolent force, the Imp, drives the killer to reveal himself after a period in which he felt safe that he would not be caught. Tschachler ties this story specifically to the circulation of the gold coin, arguing that "[g]iven Poe's physical and psychological state at the time, there is some plausibility to the idea that by so deriding the new coin, Poe staged his own personal apocalypse at the same time as he fortified the hedge against his increasing disillusionment and irrationality" (130). In other words, Tschachler argues that the Imp brings about a kind of "personal apocalypse" during a time of economic tension, and this apocalyptic energy also informs the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in which Marx and Engels describe a day when "man is at last compelled to face… his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind" (*Manifesto* 16). Poe's narrator similarly tells the reader that "[w]e stand upon the brink of a precipice" (1222), as he must also face the economic motives for his actions. Both texts thus bring the reader to a decisive moment, where they are faced with the realities of capitalism.

This story opens with an introductory essay which reflects upon the illusive spirit of perverseness introduced in "The Black Cat" and attempts to define the nature of the titular malevolent being. In this introduction, the still unknown narrator suggests that humanity is compelled to do evil. The narrator uses phrenology to suggest that there has been a lack of consideration of "a propensity which, although obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, has been… over-looked" (1219). Based on the function of the perversity in the previous story, I would like to suggest that this propensity is one for violence. The narrator suggests that there has been a lack of recognition or acknowledgement of man's propensity, going further to suggest that humanity "saw no need of the impulse… We could not perceive its necessity" (1219). The narrator's suggestion that humanity could not perceive the need for violence suggests a lack of awareness of the demand for violence that capitalism brings. The narrator seems to believe that this propensity is innate human behavior; however, his actions are clearly motivated by a desire to accumulate capital. I would like to suggest that what the narrator describes as human behavior is a representation of his understanding of capitalist society. The suggestion that humanity does not understand the necessity of violence in society also mirrors the lack of class awareness described by Marx. The introduction thus defines the narrator as someone who recognizes the violent nature of capitalism.

As was the case in the previous stories, supernatural elements are also used to represent real-life actions and violence. The narrator discusses religion and suggests that it was used as a tool for understanding the true capitalist nature of violent desires. In the discussion of the unknown or unaccepted figure of the spirit of perverseness, the narrator states that "it would have been safer to classify [man]… upon the basis of what we took it

for granted the Deity intended him to do" (1220). The narrator is suggesting that humanity uses religion to explain the unexplainable, believing that human's propensity for violence is the result of a god they cannot understand, and this discussion closely mirrors Marx's descriptions of religion as a tool to distract the masses from their exploitation. As in the previous stories, the narrator also uses another kind of supernatural force to explain his actions, in this case the titular Imp of the Perverse. The narrator describes "a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and it is but a thought, although a fearful one… the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height" (1223). The Imp presents itself as a self-destructive thought, in this example encouraging a victim to jump from a great height, or later in the story to confess to a crime they might have otherwise gotten away with. Demonic language is used to describe this thought, brought on by the Imp, suggesting "[t]here is no passion in nature so demonically impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge" (1223). What is most different about the spirit of perversity in this story, compared to the three previous stories, is the emphasis on self-destruction. We have seen Poe's narrators act against their better interests, of course, and in both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" the narrators were driven to a condemning confession; however, as Benfey points out, the crime in this story "takes up almost no space at all" (36). The narrator of this story does not claim the Imp drove him to commit his crime but focuses instead on the ways the spirit urged him toward confession. While he understands the causes of his violent behavior, he does not understand his subsequent behavior. Marx and Engels wrote that what "the bourgeoisie… produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers" (*Manifesto* 21). Marx and Engels suggest

that the bourgeoisie will bring about its own downfall, claiming that "the rule of the bourgeois democrats… will carry within it the seeds of its own destruction" ("Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League"). The narrator of this story demonstrates this prophecy. After violently rising the social ladder, he brings about his own destruction, and he uses the demonic gothic figure to describe his self-destructive behavior.

In addition to his meditation on the nature of perversity and the supernatural, the narrator also discusses how the Imp reveals itself through the act of reading and writing. As Tschachler reminds us, Poe was a writer "shaped by a capitalist publishing industry, producing texts for a mass of anonymous readers whom he at once despised and depended on for his survival" (1). It is important to remember that the meditation on reading and writing, for Poe, is likely influenced by his own experiences in a capitalist publishing industry, and that discussions of reading and writing cannot be separated from their ties to industry. The narrator expresses a desire to torment the reader, claiming there "lives no man who at some period has not been tormented… by an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution… he dreads and deprecates the anger of him whom he addresses" (1221). From the introduction, we see the potential of language as a tool to torment and anger the reader. The narrator claims that this is done with "deep regret and mortification" (1221), again emphasizing the degree to which the speaker does things because he knows that they are wrong. The Imp thus urges the narrator to write in a way that tantalizes and shocks the reader, despite his feeling that he should do otherwise, and this pressure mirrors the pressure that the capitalist publishing industry exerts on writers.

The introductory section continues to suggest "[w]e have a task before us which must be speedily performed. We know it will be ruinous to make delay" (1222). The narrator believes he has work that must be urgently completed, but struggles to face it. The narrator claims "The most important crisis of our life calls… we are consumed with eagerness to commence the work… yet we put it off until to-morrow" (1222). The narrator describes procrastination in the face of the Imp, claiming that this task is put off for no reason "except that we feel perverse" (1222). The perverseness here is vastly different than what we have seen in the previous stories. Rather than urging the narrator toward violence, this Imp distracts the narrator from work he feels he must do and pushes him instead toward scandalizing writing. The narrator states that he has a "craving for delay" (1222). Perverseness is directly tied to the putting off of work, using words like "welfare" and "labor" to describe the concept (1222). Furthermore, the narrator describes inner conflict in trying to commence this work, claiming "[w]e tremble with the violence of the conflict within us" (1222). At this moment of being confronted with the violent nature of capitalism and the demands of a capitalist publishing industry, the narrator is distracted by the urge to tantalize readers, rather than face the "crisis of our life." Just as Marx and Engels describe the need to act against capitalism, so too does our narrator describe a struggle to do so.

In addition to demonstrating Marx's claim about constant conflict within capitalism, the emphasis on labour and work further demonstrates the ways in which the narrator is linking his meditation on writing with production. Houston and Beer explain that "Marx indicates that the ineffective person exists only internally… while the effective individual exists both internally and externally… because he has money's power

to fulfill his desires. Since the arbiter of the distinction between effective and ineffective beings is money itself, money becomes the decisive judge of what is human" (35). There is a demand on the narrator, as there was on Poe, to be productive and earn profit. In this story, the way for the narrator to do this is by writing scandalizing works, which are clearly distracting him from what he believes to be more important and fulfilling work. This struggle resembles the struggle of the bourgeois to keep up with capitalist demand. The narrator cannot do the work he believes he should be doing because of the desire to be effective in capitalism. The pull that the narrator feels by the capitalist market away from the work he feels he must be doing demonstrates his state of "everlasting uncertainty" (*Manifesto* 16).

It is not until after the narrator's lengthy meditation on these abstract thoughts that he reveals his crime. In a manner very similar to Poe's previous two narrators, this third unnamed figure insists he is not mad. The narrator acknowledges that the reader might "have fancied me mad" had it not been for his introduction and claims instead that "you will easily perceive that I am one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse" (1224). The claim that the narrator is an "uncounted" victim gives some insight toward the choice to keep this narrator, as well as the past two, unnamed. The three anonymous narrators are perhaps all uncounted victims of perversity: their anonymity groups them together along with other potential victims. Marx and Engels wrote that the "need of a constantly expanding market… chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere" (*Manifesto* 16). The influence of Poe's Imp is similarly widespread, influencing a series of unnamed narrators to act violently in the face of capitalism. As was the case with the narrator of "The Tell-Tale

Heart," this narrator also insists that his crime was committed with "thorough deliberation," as he "rejected a thousand schemes, because their accomplishment involved a chance of detection" (1224). The narrator is recounting the thought and deliberation behind his crime as evidence of his sanity and intelligence. Again invoking "The Tell-Tale Heart," this narrator's victim is also unnamed, and the relationship between them is unclear. In both instances, however, it is implied that the narrator and his victim live together, and this time it is explicitly stated that the narrator inherited his victim's estate.

The narrator states that he got the idea for the means of murder from his reading, claiming "in reading some French memoirs, I found an account of a nearly fatal illness that occurred to Madame Pilau, through the agency of a candle accidentally poisoned" (1224). The narrator chooses to kill his own victim through a poisoned candle, which as Brown notes, means he "discovers the means of murder through his own act of reading" (200). The murderer choosing his method of murder from a memoir further contributes to what Benfey describes as a "divine connection between violence and the act of writing" (36). Just as the narrator has his own perverse desires in his writing, he draws violence from other texts. The narrator's success with the murder is also reliant upon the reading habits of his victim. He states that he "knew my victim's habit of reading in bed… I need not describe the easy artifices by which I substituted, in his bedroom candlestand, a wax-light of my own making" (1224). The poisoned candle is only successful because of the victim's habit of reading in bed by candlelight, in a "narrow and ill-ventilated" bedroom (1224). The fact that the means of murder was chosen from one book and was successful because of another all strengthen the tie Poe is creating between reading, writing, and

violence, linking the capitalist publishing industry with the violence of capitalism. As Brown states, “a poisoned candle seems a perfect murder weapon to call attention to the murderous effects of storytelling” (201). This concept of storytelling being murderous draws attention to the exploitative nature of the capitalist publishing industry.

In addition to the publishing industry, Benfey suggests this story also critiques the practice of crime journalism. As stated in previous sections, Poe was deeply familiar with crime journalism and was himself a reporter during the trial of James Woods. Benfey points to the significant lack of violence in this story as evidence for this critique. While a murder takes place in this story, it lacks the gory details of the previous three. The scholar suggests that Poe may have “wished to distance himself from popular practitioners of crime journalism, who relied on explicit horror to shock and titillate their readers” (37). This discussion of horror and shock value in crime journalism emphasizes the exploitative nature of this kind of journalism, further demonstrating presence of exploitation in the publishing industry. We have seen Poe critique crime journalism previously in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” invoking the murder trials Poe had reported on. In this instance, the narrator is suggesting that the shock and horror in that kind of journalism is influenced by the Imp, driving the reporters to shock the readers to encourage sales. Poe is critiquing the economic imperatives of the capitalist publishing industry by exposing its inherently exploitative nature; the Imp not only drives narrators towards violence but encourages the type of sales-driven exploitative writing that Poe links to capitalism.

This narrator does not reveal his frenzy and panic until well after his crime is committed. Content in his safety, the narrator claims “I left no shadow of a clue by which

it would be possible to convict, or even to suspect me of the crime" (1224). In addition to feeling that he would not be caught, the narrator also describes the "worldly advantages accruing from my sin" (1224). Having inherited his victim's estate, the narrator feels he is in a new position of power and stability. The self-reflection that we have seen from the narrator occurs after the events of the murder. The narrator seems to be wracked with guilt about his actions and is ready to face the Imp of the Perverse. The narrator begins to feel haunted by the idea that he might "be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty" (1225). As we have established in previous sections, haunting challenges the narrators' status as property owners. In this case, being "haunted" by the notion of confession, the narrator might lose his inherited property. "One day… in a fit of petulance" the narrator publicly speaks the words "I am safe – I am safe – yes – if I be not fool enough to make open confession" (1225). In a "maddening" fit of frenzy, the narrator speaks, "with a distinct enunciation… sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell" (1226). The narrator clearly understands why he killed his victim, citing his inheritance of the victim's property, and this demonstrates that he is aligning his description of humanity's propensity for violence with himself.

Like our three previous narrators, this narrator is also driven to commit acts of violence in order to gain property, and the story thus represents the force of capitalist demand, which encourages the exploitation of others, as was the case in "The Black Cat." Like the previous two narrators, the narrator in this story also confesses his crimes and relinquishes his property to the state, thereby submitting himself to the judicial power of the police. In this instance, however, the narrator is more self-aware than the previous three, as he realizes the reality of his situation and the realities of capitalist violence, but

is he ultimately unable to work against the system, and he continues to participate in the capitalist publishing industry despite feeling he should do otherwise.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this selection of horror stories, Edgar Allan Poe uses gothic tropes to explore themes of obsession, power, greed, and exploitation. The similarities between the use of gothic tropes in both Poe and Marx demonstrate the potential for these tropes to capture the violent nature of capitalism. In each of these four stories the state of economic panic under capitalism drives the narrators to commit seemingly inexplicable acts. In "Berenicë," a wealthy man demonstrates the violent consequences of the constant hunger for more and more capital. Egæus is so desperate to accumulate capital that he pulls the teeth from his fiancée's head so that he can exploit her body for material gain. In the political climate of changing laws which threaten a husband's control over his wife's property, Egæus grows anxious around his absorption of Berenicë's property upon marriage, viewing her as a vampire who threatens his property-owning status. Egæus defangs Berenicë, not only removing her status as a threat but demonstrating that Egæus was the true vampire after all, extracting value from others' bodies. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" we similarly see a man desperate to gain property. In this instance, he desperately seeks to climb the social ladder by overthrowing his supervisor and taking over his status as owner of their shared home. This status is short-lived, however, due to the narrator's confession to the police, the state's protectors of private property. The narrator of "The Black Cat" already has power over others. Rather than demonstrate the violent effects of a capitalist frantically seeking to reach a position of power, this story demonstrates the exploitative practices of those already in power. This narrator exploits the bodies of not only his wife, but his pets, in an exploration of the violent practices of slave-owners. Finally, "The Imp of the Perverse" emphasizes the role of capitalist greed within the

publishing industry, as the narrator uses the act of reading and writing to manipulate others, going so far as to choose a method of murder which depends upon his victim's reading habits. "The Imp of the Perverse" thus explores the role of capitalist violence in the publishing industry, yet it also illustrates the inner conflict that comes with the realization that one is a victim of economic forces beyond one's control, as the narrator reflects on the self-destructive nature of capitalism and tells the reader that they are standing at a decisive moment when they too must make a choice whether or not to acknowledge its exploitative conditions. Despite this self-awareness, however, he still feels stuck in his position and struggles to do other, more important, work.

Over the course of these four stories, we have seen the narrators become gradually more aware of the way capitalism drives them towards violence. In the first three stories the narrators become increasingly aware of their actions and the motivations behind them, but by the final story our narrator is completely aware of the violence capitalism brings to society and his role within the capitalist infrastructure. Written in Poe's final years of life and at a time of economic crisis, "The Imp of the Perverse" clearly reflects a gradual shift in his thinking, as it shows his increasing awareness of the horrors of capitalism.

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