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The Suspended End: Time, Death and the Undecidable in Poe's Thanatopolitics

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Article

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Abstract

This study examines the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe: The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar, The Premature Burial, The Pit and the Pendulum and The Masque of the Red Death. These tales are also philosophical explorations of the concept of suspended death or what is called the suspended end. They demonstrate death as deferred or indecipherable, subject to the command of the king, medicine or ghosts. Scholars have often mentioned Poe's place in gothic literature but they have paid little attention to the ways in which he contributes to biopolitical theory, hauntology and the philosophy of time. This study addresses three gaps in the existing literature: it fails to exhaustively examine thanatopolitics and necropolitics in Poe; it does not employ the Heideggerian or hauntological approaches to discuss the notion of temporal suspension; and it is oblivious to seeing the stories as a unified statement about who controls death. To fill these gaps, the present article introduces an interdisciplinary framework that addresses Poe as a political thinker of life, death and the undecided borderlands between them.

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's legacy to the American gothic tradition cannot be imagined outside his use of the psychology of terror and morbid interest in death. However, the thematic center of his stories, that is, the philosophical and political reflection on death, has long been avoided by critics who are instead busier with belle gris rimes. This discussion reopens or revisits four seminal texts of Poe: The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar (1845) The Premature Burial (1844), The Pit and the Pendulum (1842) and The Mask of the Red Death (1842) via the lenses of political ontology, theory of time and the theory of biopolitics. The two stories present death as a demonstration that is never finished; it is presented as a suspension in which science, sovereignty and spectres transform it. By doing so, Poe causes us to question the state of existence itself–not only of dying but also of those who have the power to delimit borders of the same, defer its actuality or create or abrogate it.

It is in a historical moment marked by life-extending biotechnologies, emergent forms of governance tyranny that determine who can live and who must die and pandemic regimes that subject the population to immunological calculations that determine whether they can live or must die, that the idea of the death threshold that obsessed Poe begins to gain new currency. His visions of a mesmerist halting life, a narrator being buried alive, a prisoner before a falling pendulum and a prince bricking himself up against a red death are unmatched in modern bioethical and political discussions. Stunningly, academia has yet to reap these echoes; there are myriads of progressive interpretations but the mode of Poe fiction as a mode of contemporary theories is not yet properly exploited (hauntology, political ontology, philosophy of time).

In the current article, three gaps in Poe studies are highlighted. The first is the theoretical side of things: despite the fact that terms like thanatopolitics by Giorgio Agamben, biopower by Michel Foucault and necropolitics by Achille Mbembe have redefined literary criticism, revealing genocide, state-sponsored violence and medical control, they hardly get discussed in detail in the works of Poe. In its entry into

political circulation, however, this metaphor of seclusion or severity is the most likely to have been mobilized by The Masque of the Red Death than to have been seen as a space for exploring sovereign power over life and death. Second, the methodological gap: hauntological approach and ontological interpretation at that, so mindful of ghostly indecision through Jacques Derrida or being-towards-death via Martin Heidegger, have traditionally applied themselves to such stories as Ligeia or the Fall of the House of Usher but fail to be extended to others, notably on such more material lines as “Valdemar” or “Premature Burial.” And then, at last, the corpus problem: all four stories often are addressed as singular examples or included as works in genre analysis (of horror fiction, mesmerism or gothic style), not as modulations on a key philosophical theme, the theme of what Edgar Allan Poe calls (on the title of Shelley) suspended death.

By reassembling Poe’s four stories using the scaffolding of contemporary critical theory, this article endeavors to bring the field back onto an adjusted course. Such an intervention would be especially opportune, as the current circumstances are a convergence of factors involving the speed of biotechnology, state violence and pandemic governance against which the modern condition is now defined. In Poe, the measure-for-measure of imagined horrors of a mesmerist keeping a corpse alive, a narrator in despair at a premature burial, a prisoner in dread of a contraption and a prince in quarantine against a plague translates into contemporary conflicts in the field of bioethics and politic. However, these changes in interpretation have not been addressed or responded to in a holistic manner in scholarly works. Old psychoanalytic and metaphorical interpretations are abundant; however, there is scarcely any serious discussion of hauntology, political ontology or time philosophy. Through these methodological, theoretical and corpus-based vacuums, this paper attempts to introduce the theme of a unifying philosophical motif in an overlying way, presented through Poe’s manuscripts, stylistic devices and his preoccupation with certain themes otherwise referred to as suspended death.

The four stories in question, that is, M. Valdemar, The Premature Burial, The Pit and the Pendulum and The Masque of the Red Death, have long been regarded as a formative set of opportunities within the Poe body of works but this intellectual potential has been less than substantial so far. I would argue that a single line of thought has been examined throughout the stories by virtue of which Poe explores the impossible instant at death which is both approaching and uncertain as I call it the suspended end. This track is not only a way to shed light on the gothic exploration of mesmerism, somnambulism and medical science of the author but also to foreshadow some essential motifs used in modern discussions on sovereignty, temporal jurisdiction and biopolitical regulating control. Borrowing at first on the paradigm on state of exception as promoted by Agamben, on hauntology and undecidability of Derrida and on the reflection on temporality and finitude of Heidegger, I think these books should be understood at least as philosophical thought experiments, more so than terror stories.

The innovative aspect of this study is its interdisciplinary nature and the use of updated theoretical constructs to interpret the fiction literature of the XIX century. Many critics have treated Poe’s tales as products of macabre nineteenth-century fears about early burial or pandemic illness but I suggest that what is being produced is a poetics of suspension, a regime of aesthetics in which all forms of time and

all authorities, whether legal or organic, are suspended. This analytic angle demonstrates how Poe prefigures the modern induction of ventilators to keep a brain-dead person alive, the slowing down of a judicial verdict by the delay of execution, a prisoner being imprisoned indefinitely and the politics of immunization and exclusion in the context of a pandemic or a refugee crisis. By theorizing Poe's narrative worlds as experimentation with a sovereign delay and ontological indeterminacy, his fiction can be theorized as harboring a prescient political allegory.

This reading is based on four cornerstones. First, it relocates Poe as a precursor to political theorists whose fiction looks forward to the late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pressure points over the issue of sovereignty and biopower. Second, it presents spectral life as a state of delayed dying, where bodies are not in the realm of complete life or complete death, making this concept a mandatory analytical term. Third, it pushes both hauntological and Heideggerian frames outside the literary and philosophical tradition to illustrate how the narrative form in all its mystery of the use (or muse) of temporality and suspense serves as the philosophical inquiry of Poe. Fourth, it exemplifies an approach that does not have to oppose close formal analysis and refined theoretical commentary on literature but can effectively combine both modes of critical activity to illuminate how studies in literature might meaningfully and actively engage with issues and debates about ethical, political and biopolitical frames.

To formulate this argument, the essay is structured as follows. The first of these creates the antebell/us context of mesmerism, seeming death and medical uncertainty–which constitutes the background against which Poe is able to write his work on suspended dying. The second part focuses on the stories of M. Valdemar and The Premature Burial, in which the in-between-ness of legal and medical definitions of death and the authority of the state to determine it are exposed. In the third part, the author discusses The Pit and the Pendulum where he likens the process of its action to the concept of being-toward-death as put forward by Heidegger himself as well as scenes of torture in the hands of the inquisitor were contextualized along the ideas of sovereign exception and terminating life as only a matter of survival. The fourth section provides a novel approach to reading the story of The Masque of the Red Death using necropolitics and immunitarian theory and how the quarantine acts as a metaphor for the sovereign power construct in recognition that it is merely an illusion in the control of death. The conclusion draws all these readings together and their suggestions for the current political situation.

By addressing us to people in the state between death and dying, Poe's stories pose the question of when exactly one is dead and who decides that. The relevance of this question in the antebellum period is as relevant now when there is an expansion of many technological, legal and political systems governing the limits of life. As a critical approach to the reactivation of Poe's fiction, this essay proposes the suspended end as a remarkable tool not only to consider its development but also to conceptualize and think about the undecidable terms of current biopolitics.

Literature Review

Poe's fascination with death, burial and things that are macabre has been well studied by those who researched Gothic books and early-19th-century America. Many of the first writers and experts recognized that Poe's common motifs of early burial and ghosts returning to the living and unwell characters played a large role in his Gothic style (Lalmalsawmtluanga 2025). Recently, scholars have linked Poe's stories to the death culture of the nineteenth century, showing how the medical confusion of death, the public's dread of burial before death and cultural traditions of mourning shaped his work. During that time, both medicine and culture made people uneasy about living and dying, as as long as it took to create who is "death" and having catalepsy or coma created fear we were being buried alive. In his story, Poe mentions this cultural fear, declaring that the separation between life and death is, at most, a grey area. No one can provide an exact division between one and the other, the living and the dead. Many critics use this line to show that Poe knows how uncertain the boundary is. However, most research in this area examines these subjects using biography, psychology or history rather than political philosophy or deconstruction (Ebralidze 2023).

The psychological aspects and symbolic imagery of these four stories have been the main concerns of most existing analyses. Specifically, the story of The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar (1845) has been examined in light of mesmerism and the scientific language of the time. Experts point out that Poe was fascinated by Victorian ideas about mesmerism (hypnotism) and believed that it could either prolong life or put death on hold. Several readers in more recent times believed that "M. Valdemar" was an actual event (Tindol 2021). Megan Stern's study of historical science explains that "M. Valdemar" responds to the increase in professional medicine in the 1840s and to the "dead but not fully dead" patients of that era (Stern 2008). Stern explains that even though medicine approaches such things with skepticism, since the mid-18th century, it has repeatedly created situations where people appear to be alive but are not such as those in permanent vegetative states. Stern finds Valdemar's ghost to be an example of this phenomenon. Other experts have related the story to the question of how facts are accurately perceived and examined in literature. For example, it's noted that Derrida himself made use of "M. Valdemar": he treated the story's final statement "Yes;—no;—I have been sleeping—and now—now—I am dead" as epigraph to his article Speech and Phenomena because of its contradictory nature. Because of this strange sentence, experts have been looking at the ideas it involves – this current study takes this further by introducing Derrida's idea of the undecidable. However, philosophical interpretations of the work were few before the present work was done. According to Jessica Whyte, the author here shows how Valdemar's condition matches one of Agamben's ideas about the need to be both living and dead (Whyte 2013). Although Whyte centered his book on political philosophy, the way he talked about novels hints at the possibilities for a fuller study from the thanatopolitical perspective that this article carries out.

"The Premature Burial" has been analyzed both historically and psychologically. Those who write about Poe's stories, including Bondeson point out how many people in Poe's time feared being buried while still alive. Reports of people rising from their graves or just missing out on being buried give the story a historical basis (Bondeson 2001). Experts have pointed out that in this tale, Poe offers his views on being buried but then tells of his own burial in a story that turns out to be a clue to his fake death. In

place of a usual depression ending, the story moves in a light-hearted way for the narrator to move past his obsession with death. In traditional approaches to the story, it is thought to show Poe's view of how fear can shape the mind. Bonaparte's famous Freudian reading of the story connects the apprehension about burial to the actions of the unconscious (Sederholm 2017). Later writers have looked at how "The Premature Burial" explores the mystery of when death might occur and the moment one becomes motionless. According to the narrator, there are medical instances where a total halt in bodily functions takes place, although it is true that these are properly called suspension rather than death. Seeing that life can be stopped and started again highlights why this story addresses the problem of declaring someone dead. To date, critical literature has not linked this insight to Agamben's idea of "bare life" outside the protection of law which this study does (Forbes 2013). Furthermore, although ghosts are absent from it, "The Premature Burial' succeeds in making readers worry by mixing up what is imagined and what is real and by recalling many people alive in their coffins. According to Derrida's hauntology, the present is always affected by things that are neither really there nor at all (Derrida 1994). Until now, looking at Poe using hauntology usually involves exploring stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia." Here, we use it in connection with "The Premature Burial," making the living you see as a kind of ghostly figure and exploring how the story expresses a society's fear of dying young (Agamben 1998).

People often call "The Pit and the Pendulum" one of Poe's best and most suspenseful psychological tales. The story is set during the Spanish Inquisition and the tells of a man who goes through many stories. He is first gaoled in darkness above a hidden pit, strapped under a descending pendulum blade and finally brought close to the pit by fiery walls, all before being rescued by General Lasalle at the end (Iwanicka 2022). In previous times, people have often emphasized how the story looks at fear, the passage of time and how things are experienced. The story is remarkable because it clearly explains how the narrator feels hopeful and downhearted as each threat comes his way. In 1846, followers of Charles Baudelaire valued the tale because it dragged readers down into a world of terror by painting the darkness, the noise of the blade and the vibrations felt by each whisper. Some have taken this story to mean the clash between reason and pointless cruelty or, more hopefully, the unlikely salvation given by a heroic figure. Even though the punishments described in Cesare's story are clearly political, few connections have been made to this field in related studies. Others might suggest that reducing prisoners to bare life is similar to the conditions discussed by Agamben, in which sovereign power can cause those under its control to lose both legal rights and identity and face execution (Agamben 1998). When the French army succeeds, the winner of life and death is determined by the ruling political force. The way stories like Witness handle time and suspense is a good subject for theoretical analysis. Poe uses the moment of waiting for death under the pendulum to make the story all about that prolonged process. One commentator notes that the story is set around major events appearing to happen very slowly, one after the other, as everything is dragged out by a slow-moving pendulum. The delay in death brings to mind an idea in Heidegger's thought: being-toward-death, in which a person is genuinely alive by noticing their mortality. The prisoner thinks clearly that "the outcome would be death and a type of death more painful than usual. My attention was only focused on the method and time. Here, the author

shows that the character understands that death will happen but is only interested in determining when it will occur and what it will involve, a point that Heidegger makes when he adds that death itself is certain while its timing and form are not (Heidegger 1962). Previously, this link has not been described; this study shows how Poe centers the story around the existential state just before death, with timed struggles chipping away at the main character. Death presides over this story, even before it occurs, because the prisoner lives and moves near things that mean their death—the pit, the blade and the rats that await a meal. From a hauntological viewpoint, death in the story is an almost intangible force — an "undeath" that surrounds the young woman, something we will discuss using Derrida's ideas.

"The Masque of the Red Death" is an unusual Poe work that tells a story about death that many people cannot escape. The author tells Prince Prospero and his wealthy court linking up in a fortified monastery to flee from the plague. Amid all of their over-the-top, bright-colored parties, they try to ignore the suffering of people beyond their walls. At midnight, a character dressed in the clothes of the Red Death victims appears and grants everyone present with death as soon as they are spotted (Lopes 2021; Wright 2021; Yoon 2021). Darkness, Decay and the Red Death, it is revealed, reigned completely over everyone present. Interpretive history: Critics have many times taken "Masque" to represent a lesson about those who use their power to escape their own mortality. Prospero symbolises hubris and the extreme isolation found among the rich, even though his name brings to mind Shakespeare's wise and successful magician from The Tempest. Much has been written about the symbolism in the story – for example, the colorful rooms represent life's various stages, with the final black room and its red windows symbolizing death and the huge ebony clock reminding us that each passing hour stops the fun briefly. Earlier discussions describe how the setting's clocks going off hour after hour fill guests with fear and bring them closer to midnight. Death, of course, is universal, as "Masque" so clearly expresses – no status or class difference can protect people from it. In the past few years, this work has attracted attention as a reflection of pandemic situations; during the COVID-19 outbreak, people mentioned it in discussing cases where communities tried to isolate themselves but COVID-19 reached them anyway (Alzoubi 2024; Dewi 2021; Sianturi 2021). Essentially, this has encouraged new analyses of "Masque" using ideas from immunity and biopolitics. Baker adopts Roberto Esposito's view to show how the abbey represented by Prospero absorbed immigrants, making it similar to the modern gated groupings of the elite – surroundings of supuneess that may actually solidify into lifelessness (Baker 2023). Contrary to appearances, according to Baker, Prospero's policy increases the danger to those left outside when they are abandoned. Deserting his subjects is the political equivalent of strategies used by current regimes to permit some members of society to die from the virus. It clearly associates this story with thanatopolitics because it suggests that power over life and death can result from a sovereign's choice to act or even to act lazily and leave some to die. It is also obvious from "Masque" that hauntology is present: The Red Death is like an invisible guest inside the costume. Derrida defines a spectre as neither existing nor not, so Red Death as Death itself appearing to haunt Poe's novel fits the definition. Hutchison observes that the Red Death first appears as a nondescript character at the masquerade but slowly turns out to be the epitome of what the party was supposed to exclude. Nevertheless, a complete reading of the novel as a hauntological story – focusing on the sense that mortality haunts the plot and

the castle's efforts to block it allow the dead to resurface – is still missing. It will be explained here how Derrida's sense of repressed ideas coming back as ghosts supports this perspective.

Thanatopolitics, hauntology and narrative temporality have been used separately in literary studies, although rarely together and rarely as a group for Poe. Studies on Gothic novels have not drawn on Agamben's work on sovereignty and the state of exception (the concept of homo sacer) as much as they have analyzed modern writing about camps, refugees or political violence (Brewster 2024). Even so, Agamben explores a hazy zone in which life and death overlap and based on my reading of Poe's works, things like Valdemar's trance and premature burial hold great relevance to Poe's stories. This concept of Achille Mbembe, called necropolitics, similar to thanatopolitics, is used to analyze how death regimes are portrayed in literature (Mbembe 2003). In some studies of plague literature or stories of war, necropolitical theory is applied to show who is easily discarded by society. This concept of Achille Mbembe, called necropolitics, similar to thanatopolitics, corresponds to the socio-political analysis of death regimes and is used to analyze how death regimes are In some studies of plague literature or stories of war, necropolitical theory is applied to show who is easily discarded by society. In Poe's case, Baker's analysis suggests that a necropolitical approach is useful for "Masque" and that Poe's story of both plague and privilege may be related to biopolitics (Roundtree 2022). In Poe's case, Baker's analysis suggests that a necropolitical approach is useful for "Masque" and that Poe's story of both plague and privilege may be related to biopolitics. This article draws on Poe's other stories: "Pit and Pendulum" criticises the regime of the Inquisition for turning prisoners into deathly nonpersons, while both "Valdemar" and "Premature Burial" examine necropolitics as medical dilemmas (Timralieva 2023).

Because hauntology depicts ghosts as dividing lines between binary oppositions, Derrida's idea is widely used to read Gothic and spectrocentric texts. Scholars in this field have accepted that many Gothic works worry readers about problems that are half alive or never truly resolved (Davis 2005). However, most applications of hauntology to Poe's work involve only characters who return from death, such as Madeleine from the tomb in "The Fall of the House of Usher," or the spectral Ligeia. Not much has been said about the existence of characters such as Valdemar, one of Poe's most literal undead who is not traditionally considered a ghost. "Derrida's insight is, in my view, that a spectre is neither present nor absent and neither mortal nor immortal" (Derrida 1994). This section shows how M. Valdemar and Poe's other suspended dead feel during hypnosis. We propose using this concept to state that Poe's stories use the idea of hauntology well ahead of their creation, as their horror depends on not knowing whether the characters are alive or dead. In addition, I use Derrida's notion of the undecidable to explain the narrative and ethical issues found in Poe's tales. A case in point is the hypnotized Valdemar living or dead. Even though the book gives a final answer, it leaves us unsure about what happened to Valdemar when he was transfixed. Derrida (1993) set out in Aporias that death cannot be fully understood, since even as it happens, the subject is no longer present to experience it. Poe's stories of being very close to death and about people stuck between life and death serve in a roundabout way to dramatize this paradox. To date, studies have not clearly compared Derrida's ideas of aporias to Poe's designs which tend to confuse the reader or deliver revelations later. In doing so, we add our theoretical approach to Poe's work. Even so, in Being and Time, Heidegger's philosophy of time and death has been used to

study modern or Shakespearean heroes but not Poe's gothic heroes. One time this topic is covered is in cultural studies, as an author links Derrida to Heidegger in noting that the phrase "I am living" hints at the possibility of death for that person and that, as Heidegger put it, every human is both dying and alive. In his essay Butler discusses how Poe's short story "M. Valdemar" mockingly suggests that at death there is a fixed time, due to mesmerism throwing the doctors' predictions off course. We proceed to look at Poe's four tales utilising the framework of Heideggerian ideas, mentioning how the precariousness death gives to existence is shown in "Pit," how failing to looking death in the eye is seen in the story through Prospero's use of distractions and how experiencing death is called into question when realising it in "Valdemar." None of the existing literature on Poe includes analyses rooted in existential phenomenology, so in this article, we present such ideas for the first time.

So far, the literature on this work has offered helpful context and some shared messages regarding medical horrors, cultural trends, allegories and morals but there is still room for an approach that includes theories from political and philosophical disciplines. Using thanatopolitics, hauntology and narrative temporality, this study fills a gap in previous Poe scholarship by revealing how Poe's tales discuss death and time earlier than many later theorists (Cârstea 2023; Moreland 2023).

Methodology

For this research, we used an approach that closely reads texts and checks their meanings using concepts from philosophy and political theory. Although we follow the IMRaD layout, we replace the experiments with a description of our analytic approach and our results include a detailed study of the texts as per that approach.

Text Selection

The four case studies in this book are "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," "The Premature Burial," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "The Masque of the Red Death." Poe's stories of death include these tales and each directly explores unfinished or indefinable death situations in different ways. Choosing these can help us analyze them together, since they all focus on the fact that each tale's ending is not straightforward (death or closure). These stories were chosen to explore the idea of thanatopolitics in Poe's fiction, by including discussions of ruling in life/death matters (a mesmerist's control, a tribunal's decision to execute, a ruler's choices for quarantine) and tales of spirits or uncertainty (family living dead, chased by man-made horrors, anxious about their outcome, being spooked by spirit intrusions). As parts of these tales require it, references are made to other writings by Poe or contemporary materials to add context.

Thanatopolitics/Biopolitics: Based on the writings of Giorgio Agamben and other theorists, this paper examines the manner in which the stories of Poe portray the application of power over life and death. Held central by Agamben is his idea that the state of exception declared by a sovereign excludes certain lives from justice and puts them in danger of death. On page 121 of Homo Sacer, Agamben explains that in today's world, sovereignty means that it can choose who to kill and who lives, thus "blurs the line

between life and death" (Agamben, 1998). We use the thanatopolitical concept to analyze the prisoners in "Pit and Pendulum" and those outside Prospero's abbey in "Masque" As Achille Mbembe describes, necropolitics provides a useful addition to this framework because it deals with political supremacy over who may be spared from violence and who must face it (Mbembe 2003). Since Mbembe was writing recently in postcolonial times, nevertheless, the point he makes helps explain Poe, for example, in Poe's story, Prospero's isolation is necropolitical because it creates the effect of marginalizes any outsiders. To do this methodologically, I closely examine how power is structured in various scenes and how decisions about life and death are featured. We consider the following: Who is in charge of calling an end of life? Whose lives are denied all values and when is death chosen or settled instead of life? They joined the analysis of details in the story with the analysis of political philosophy. To support our analysis, we turn to Homo Sacer by Agamben and Necropolitics which clarifies these notions (such as life that can be killed outside of the law and plague as an expression of sovereign power). I treat these stories as imaginary studies on thanatopolitics, reading their Gothic plots as examples or prototypes of biopolitics. This approach is defined by the hermeneutic correlation between text and theory, rather than quantitative or coding methods (Brennan 2024; Gržinić 2021).

Deconstruction and Hauntology: The deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida was used to analyze the texts regarding the themes of undecidability and spectrality. Derridean ideas that appear often include the undecidable, meaning things that cannot be easily divided and hauntology which describes how the presence of the now is influenced by past or absent things. To do this, we carefully studied the text with a close eye on places where ideas appear together and seem to oppose each other. Looking at M. Valdemar's words while under hypnosis ("Yes;—no;—…"), we see them as a type of language that is not fully known or resolved (Pecastaing 2025; Fisher 2012; Davis 2005). Regarding the Red Death, we believe it calls into question the way reality is understood throughout the story. We use Derrida's book Spectors of Marx for an understanding of spectres in theory and we look at texts aside from it for his ideas on the limited nature of the "I" and its renewal. In addition, based on secondary literature on Derrida, we note that whenever someone says, "I am alive," they imply that their death is possible, just as the narrative structure in Poe's tales implies that the speaker might end up dead or buried in the telling. In practice, a deconstructive methodology points out the moments when the firm statements in the stories are contradicted: for example, how "Premature Burial" claims it's too terrifying for novels (only to become a novel) and how "Masque" concludes with Death having complete power, reconsidering all that came before (Ören 2024). Where there are questions about the nature of certain elements in the plot, we look at those not as plot holes but as things that matter to the story. Thanks to Derrida, our analysis does not miss these important shifts in the life–death situation.

Existential-Phenomenological Analysis

We examine how Heidegger's ideas can show us how characters deal with death and what the passage of time appears for them.

We use the Heideggerian concept of being-toward-death, that the awareness of one approaching death makes life authentic, to the prisoner in the story, who is ever aware that death can strike at any time. We also make use of Heidegger's point that the common perception of death is remote, while genuine anxiety about death is closer. Take Prince Prospero who pretends death, not part of his world by keeping it outside the walls until it is too late for anyone. Instead, the main character of "Pit" is forced to deal with death directly. We considered the way events are arranged in time to emphasize any differences in attitudes toward death. Just as the tick/tock in "Masque" and the pendulum in "Pit" suggest, we believe that what gives time its meaning is death lying in the distance (Heidegger 1962). Heidegger also points out that Dasein begins dying at the beginning of life. Thinking about Valdemar as trance-like helps to see how the process of always dying is wholly present in the novel. When using Heidegger in analyses, we interpret character actions and readings for connections to what Heidegger discusses and we quote from Being and Time to mark those interactions. We could use Heidegger's thinking about death to explain why the narrator of "Pit" is in a state of not knowing the time until a slight occurrence changes everything.

Research Procedure

The researchers carefully analyzed the four tales by reading them several times. The novel contains themes related to (a) escaping time, (b) events surrounding life and death and (c) the characters who control their dying processes. Scholars linked the stories to ideas in critical theory; for example, Valdemar's body was equated with Agamben's bare life, the pendulum represented real-world time running out and Prospero's abbey stood for Esposito's model of immunity. The Results section sorted texts by story, highlighted what makes each special and showed similarities between them. The works of Stern and Baker were examined to check or refute my understanding of the subject. All Poe quotes come from the edition of Poetry and Tales and any citations from their theories are referenced by pages or sections based on the translations given by Agamben, Derrida and Heidegger. This research method is more important for interpreting cases than for making general conclusions. Our analysis is founded on a close reading of the text, which brings to light some minor details that could have been missed in earlier analyses. This approach is complemented by the use of previous criticism since it identifies points of concurrence or divergence thereby adding value to our model of interpretation. Each tale is examined separately and analyzed through different theories to address the concepts of suspended death, postponement and being in between. The Results section covers each piece and the Discussion explains the group findings concerning Poe's interest in thanatopolitics.

Results

Poe's tale presents M. Valdemar as suspended between life and death after being mesmerized. He is dead, with no breath or pulse but is mentally responsive when in a state of hypnosis. His body fully decomposed once the mesmerist ended the trance. The story can be interpreted through the prism of thanatopolitical theory as an exploration of power over death. The mesmerist breaks the natural order and puts Valdemar in the state of liminality, neither dead nor alive, what Agamben refers to as the zone

of indistinction (Agamben 1998). Although Valdemar initially agrees to the procedure, after being hypnotized, he becomes a subject of an outside power. According to Agamben's concept of homo sacer, they become a character deprived of any legal status and turned into bare life (Agamben 1998). In this way, Poe foreshadows the major themes of biopolitical discourse by indicating that death can be postponed. Although Valdemar initially accepts the experiment, he becomes a slave to a foreign power when he is hypnotized. According to Agamben, people such as homo sacer can be deprived of their rights under the law and left with bare life (Agamben, 1998). Poe claims that death is not inevitable and can be postponed, anticipating later biopolitical thought. can be postponed, echoing ideas that were later explored in biopolitics theory. Valdemar's existence challenges the definition of death itself—"what is usually termed death" is framed as only one possibility. The mesmerist intervention led to the suspension of the law and the body. The misconception is also augmented by the words of Valdemar: "I have been asleep and now—I am dead." This contradictory concept unsettles the idea of being present, as the "I" claims it is no longer there (Derrida 1973). Poe ends in a quick decay, which underlines death's inevitability. Until that point, characters are hesitant to call him a "slumberer" or a "sleep-waker" which implies an unresolved status. The idea of spectrality by Derrida applies: Valdemar is not here or there, his voice is a revenant (Derrida 1994). Poe adds to this discomfort when he refers to his voice as that of a giant fly, a mechanical and disturbing type of speech that emerges from a decaying body. This ghostly voice reveals how the language itself may have signs of the death of the speaker.

Poe's story extends Valdemar's death much longer than anyone would normally expect it to be. While the narrative begins with his death, it stretches over seven months of stasis before suddenly collapsing into a rapid decay. This unwillingness is reflected in the story, in which a long period of stagnation is succeeded by a moment of resolution, reminding us that we can postpone death but it will come very suddenly and without warning. Heidegger might say that Valdemar's death was deferred, not denied; the final collapse confirms that death cannot be avoided. The horror of Valdemar's immediate putrefaction expresses nature's resistance to the artificial prolongation of death. This helps to justify Poe's exploration of thanatopolitical ideas since the mesmerist takes full control of the life and death of Valdemar (Tindol 2021). The body of Valdemar is a place of strange in-betweenness: his voice is heard after his death and this is a liminal state that is frightening because of its unnaturalness and because it raises more profound questions about what death is. This is an expression of Derrida and Blanchot's thought that death is something that cannot be experienced or understood. The long-term condition of Valdemar proves that death may occur in a second but it can be a long and disorderly process. The story is a forerunner to the contemporary debate on end-of-life care and the limits of consciousness in coma patients questions that the story poses but does not answer. Similarly, The Premature Burial is about the horror of being buried alive as a result of catalepsy. In this case, Poe's narrator is overwhelmed by the fear of being thought dead, which reflects the fears of the 19 th century about the medical ambiguity of death and the thin, barely noticeable boundary between life and death. Illnesses such as catalepsy mimic death by suspending the signs of life. From a thanatopolitical perspective, this is how the state or medical authorities can pronounce a person dead on vague grounds; in other words, they can exercise sovereign power over life and death. As Agamben suggests, premature burial becomes a bureaucratic

error with life or death consequences. To resist this, the narrator builds a self-opening vault filled with tools for survival. Unlike Prince Prospero's abbey, this strategy was rational and not selfish. Thus, the story shifted from terror to agency. Poe does not only criticize the fear of death itself but also criticizes the systems that determine death too early, as legal or medical decisions can erroneously declare living people dead (Manni 2024).

Death, being awaken from it and the prospect of being trapped there is first seen in The Premature Burial, analyzed using hauntology and psychology. In this part of the narrator's dream, he sees many dead bodies in their graves, trying to get out: "Many of them moaned about being cramped; restless murmurs; they had again turned over in the coffin". These pictures symbolize Derrida's theory of the spectrum as an unfinished trauma (Derrida, 1994). Being terrified of being trapped alive, the narrator believes these beings show proof that some people are buried alive which is wrong. As a result of his fear, he stays with others, needs to be around observers and sets up an opening vault for himself. He starts to exist in a state that makes him neither fully alive nor dead. This conclusion is very different from that of other studies. Soon after waking on the boat, believing he is buried, the horror disappears as fast as it materializes. After overcoming death in this dream, he is no longer afraid of dying young: "I now understood why I had not worried about being buried early". By letting go of his fear, he once more takes part in life which reflects Heidegger's change from feeling an inauthentic fear to welcoming acceptance. We can see this idea about confronting the spectrum in what is happening here. After the symbolic event, the narrator's overwhelming fear disappears. By making the reader tense with suspense and sudden breaks in the story, Poe disturbs the reader and laughs it off with irony. Unlike Valdemar, here, the resolution is achieved through someone learning about themselves, instead of a scare (Sederholm 2017). Beatriz's survival is explained by her own revelation and not by institutional or systemic changes. Nearly dying leads Frodo to realize that death is real and comes to all. Bondeson comments that most legal efforts to stop premature burials were inspired by uncommon fears. Poe illustrates how these fears affect personal and general stories of death. Instead of using fantasy horror, Poe shows violence inflicted by institutions in his story "The Pit and the Pendulum." The protagonist is sentenced to death by the Inquisition and undergoes prolonged torture which shows the regime's intent to maintain total power over the victims. As Foucault proposed and Agamben explained, such a setting involves reducing a person to "bare life," where the body becomes subject to control and has neither a name nor lawful status (Foucault 1978). The pit, pendulum and closing walls show different ways in which death is handled. Time is very important: as the pendulum drops, the main character moves inexorably toward an end. Poe uses many details about sensory experiences to show that the narrator is forced to think about his own death which leads him to get a clearer view of himself and sometimes come to terms with it. This period of immense fear soon ended when the French army arrived. Because of this rescue, authority is overcome and the characters are free from oppression and fear. Although the ending leaves some questions, we realize that politics is fragile and that death can happen unexpectedly. When analyzed through hauntology, the Inquisition acts as a kind of spectral power. Although the cyborg is not seen, it greatly shapes the novel with ruthlessness (Sherstiuk 2019). As the main character remains near dying, death continues to return in various forms. Thus, the fact that the protagonist walks away from certain

deaths appears almost unreal. Poe uses suspense, distortion of time and the dread of death to demonstrate the connection between power and death. The story shows that dying can be put off but can never truly be denied and that both our actions and outside events can exceed destiny, even when everything appears to be under control. In “Masque of the Red Death,” Poe criticizes the idea that the wealthy can avoid death like everyone else. Instead of trying to save those strucks, Prince Prospero hides his court from the plague. With this division, Agamben explains his version of thanatopolitics, where the sovereign chooses some people to live and excludes others as “bare life”. The abbey acts as an “immunitary enclave” (Esposito 2011), making freedom and wealth possible by exploiting those outside its community. In the last minute of the year, death appears again, not just as a figurative idea but as a real, ghostly guest. The story suddenly moves forward and backward in time and physical spaces blend together. The skeletal clock chimes every hour to remind people that time is the killer. The blue room, the black room and the sense of being closed inside are all parts of Poe’s allegory of life, finishing when death takes over. Time cannot be denied and as a result everyone at the event is instantly and randomly killed. In this manner, Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics is demonstrated: the decision to let people live or die becomes the most important task in power relationships during a plague. According to hauntology (Derrida, 1994), the Red Death appears and disappears, like a forgotten memory coming to the right wrongs. Poe explains death in his story as a type of haunting and the clock and the light going out together in the end let us know that time itself has ended. Tensions before midnight, instead of events, form a suspense in Poe’s story. Everyone is reminded in the story that death is the one thing no one can escape and trying to avoid it only brings it closer.

Discussion

In Poe’s stories, it is difficult to tell where death stops and life begins. The premature burial is one of the stories that revolve around characters that are in a state between life and death, neither alive nor dead. According to Derrida and Agamben, this “living death” falls within an area where sovereign power makes death uncertain (Agamben 1998). These stories show that death often takes time and is an ongoing process, calling into question how we modern deal with death.

Poe condemns attempts to regulate death by means of political force or science and proves their inefficiency and unpredictable consequences. “Valdemar” explores the sense of wonder as the viewpoint character’s spell lasts for less time than expected, whereas in “Pit and the Pendulum,” the Inquisition’s hold over the witness significantly weakens due to happening two centuries before the Spanish Inquisition. In “Masque,” Montaigne illustrates that choose the cancer is the same as any other human. Each tale illustrates the results of using weapons, showing Foucault’s style of biopower: if life is valued, we must often allow some to perish (Rabinow 2006; Scott-Smith 2015; Biermann 2014).

Each of the four novels deals with the return of a hauntological theme—death that initially appears concealed–comes back with greater strength.

The rotting of Valdemar, the ghastly shapes of the premature burial and the arrival of the Red Death all symbolize the ultimate unsuccess of repression-death is going to happen no matter how much one tries to deny or delay it. Just as Poe portrays life in terms of death, Derrida later observed that life always bears the marks of death. Authors often shift time in their tales, creating suspense, pauses and countdowns that increase doubt and make readers feel more emotionally involved which Derrida calls narrative “aporia” (Pecastaing 2025; Fisher 2012).

Poe’s beliefs strongly criticize both arrogance in science and acts of cruelty in society. The argument is that trying to control death with politics, science or denial actually worsens things. The main idea in “Premature Burial” is that to fully survive, we must give up our hold over things. Poe’s stories demonstrate that coming to terms with death makes life more worthwhile, in line with Heidegger’s assertion (Murray 2021; Moreland 2023).

Conclusion

This paper explores how the four short fictions chosen by Edgar Allan Poe–The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar, The Premature Burial, The Pit and the Pendulum and The Masque of the Red Death–collectively raise a literary and philosophical concern with what I would call the suspended end. In such stories, death ceases to be an event and becomes a process whose postponement, attenuation or prevention by sovereign power, medical anomaly or spiritual disturbance is ad infinitum. Every story provokes the belief that death is a time that is legally or biologically fixed. However, Poe develops situations in which power, time and corporeality are always intertwined in undecidable figures, disclosing the fact that even the idea of an end is structurally and politically challenged. What seems to be gothic fantasy, however, as one might come to realize, turns out to be a speculative dialogue with the regimes that disable death to secure the enjoyment of life, a project that is strangely consistent with contemporary discourses in biopolitics and political ontology.

By triangulating thanatopolitics, hauntology and Heideggerian temporality, this paper posits a completely intertwined theoretical framework in accordance with which one can read these stories not just as an example of gothic horrors but as prolonged commentaries upon the processes of deferring death in the name of establishing control over life.

The mesmerist in Poe's story is not only supernatural; he becomes a kind of extra-legal figure, controlling the body and transgressing the natural and legal boundaries of life and death. In the story, the legal and medical instability of the system of apparent death and its bureaucratic ramifications are represented by the narrator of the story, The Premature Burial. The victim of the torture in the story, The Pit and the Pendulum, is pushed into the state of bare life, a sovereign state of exception in the context of which the element of time transforms into a tool of power. Lastly, the ill-starred demonstrators of the ill-named “The Masque of the Red Death” put on a communal charade of immunitary exemption that collapses on the necropolitical inevitability that death will strike again–and it does.

This review addresses three gaps in the research. First, it confronts the existing theoretical gap in presenting Poe's writing within contemporary models in terms of biopolitics, presumably belonging to the discussion of the modern genocidal regime, state violence or medical ethics but only infrequently applicable in the context of antebellum fiction. Whereas death and disease in Poe's stories have been cursory in past research, this article shows how the elements present a much larger logic of sovereign control, legal liminality and undecidability of temporality. Second, it addresses the methodological gap by implementing a hauntological and Heideggerian approach which is not commonly used in the literature. Thus, death is not only a theme but also an ontological suspension that drives the very form of narrative. Third, it fills in the corpus gap by treating these four stories as a system of interrelated work or in other words, multiple returns and developments of the same key problem of deferred dying, thereby showing how Poe was engaged throughout his foibles in narrative innovation with the politics of finitude.

This article contributes to the literature in four ways. To begin with, it transposes Poe into a theorist of suspended death a writer who, in fiction, projects ahead of his time the ethical and political conditions of biotechnological intervention, medical sovereignty and immunitary logic. By doing so, this article encourages scholars to consider PoeFramework's imaginative ramblings as philosophical thought challenges pertinent to the contemporary discourse of medical humanities and political thought. Second, it invents a new heuristic category namely spectral life which is applicable not only to reading Poe but also to re-imagining the contemporary preoccupation in being rigorously bound to the rational pursuit of veneration of biological life even at the expense of annihilating ontological clarity. Third, it focuses on the narrative manipulation of time and suspension narrative as the formal representative of the philosophical and political deferral of death in clocks, pendulums, trances and thresholds. Finally, it shows how literary criticism may ensue in the in-between of formalist close reading and theoretical extrapolation, yielding analyses that may be instructive both textually and in an encompassing contextual manner.

Reinvesting in Poe with such an interdisciplinary approach enables us to learn that the stories do not merely portray nineteenth-century concerns about death and its aftermath but actually set out to question the meaning of the postponed end–both biologically and politically, as well as narratively. This question is all the more pressing now in a world of pandemics, life support controversies and biotechnological extensions: who is to adjudicate the time of death and what happens after adjudication has become postponed, retracted and undecidable? This question posed by Poe is never resolved and what he shows in his narratives is only the sense of urgency, horror and political possibility of such a question. In their closed resolutions they reflect a world in transition to liminality and control, in which the boundary between life and death, the conclusion of a story itself, is no longer determined but is petrifyingly unreliable.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Ulugbek Ochilov conceptualized the study, conducted the textual analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Access Statement

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study. Paperpal AI and Quillbot are used for language polishing purpose.

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