The Critic
June, 1903

The Terrible and the Tragic in Fiction

I am anxious that your firm should continue to be my publishers, and, if you would be willing to bring out the book, I should be glad to accept the terms which you allowed me before —that is, you receive all profits, and allow me twenty copies for distribution to friends.

So wrote Edgar Allan Poe, on August 13, 1841, to the publishing house of Lee & Blanchard. They replied:

We very much regret to say that the state of affairs is such as to give little encouragement to new undertakings. . . . We assure you that we regret this on your account as well as our own, as it would give us great pleasure to promote your views in relation to publication.

Five years later, in 1846, Poe wrote to Mr. E. H. Duyckinck:

For particular reasons I am anxious to have another volume of my tales published before the first of March. Do you think it possible to accomplish it for me? Would not Mr. Wiley give me, say $50, in full for the copyright of the collection I now send?

Measured by the earnings of contemporaneous writers, it is clear that Poe received little or nothing for the stories he wrote. In the autumn of 1900, one of the three extant copies of his "Tamerlane and Other Poems" sold for $2050--a sum greater, perhaps, than he received from the serial and book sale*s* of all his stories and poems.

On the one hand, he was more poorly rewarded than even the mediocre of his contemporaries; while, on the other hand, he produced a more powerful effect than the great majority of them and achieved a fame more brilliant and lasting.

Cooke, in a letter to Poe, says:

"The Valdemar Case" I read in a number of your Broadway Journal last winter—as I lay in a turkey blind, muffled to the eyes in overcoats, &c, and pronounce it without hesitation the most damnable, vraisemblable, horrible, hair-lifting, shocking, ingenious chapter of fiction that any brain ever conceived, or hands treated. That gelatinous, viscous sound of man's voice! there never was such an idea before. That story scared me in broad day, armed with a double-barrel Tyron turkey gun. What would it have done at midnight in some old ghostly country-house?

I have always found some one remarkable thing in your stories to haunt me long after reading them. The teeth of Berenice— the changing eyes of Morella—that red and glaring crack in the House of Usher—the pores of the deck in "The MS. Found in a Bottle"—the visible drops

falling into the goblet in "Ligeia," &c.—there is always something of this sort to stick by the mind— by mine at least.

About this time Elizabeth Barrett Browning, then Miss Barrett, wrote to Poe:

Your "Raven" has produced a sensation, a "fit horror," here in England. ... I hear of persons haunted by the "Nevermore," and one acquaintance of mine who has the misfortune of possessing a "bust of Pallas" never can bear to look at it in the twilight. . . . Then there is a tale of yours . . . which is going the round of the newspapers, about mesmerism, throwing us all into "most admired disorder," and dreadful doubts as to whether "it can be true," as the children say of ghost stories. The certain thing in the tale in question is the power of the writer, and the faculty he has of making horrible improbabilities seem near and familiar.

Though his stories threw people into "most admired disorders" and scared men in broad day in "Turkey blinds," and though his stories were read, one might say, universally, there seemed at the time a feeling against them which condemned them as a class of stories eminently repulsive and unreadable. The public read Poe's stories, but Poe was not in touch with that public. And when that public spoke to him through the mouths of the magazine editors, it spoke in no uncertain terms; and, rebelliously aspiring, he dreamed of a magazine of his own—no "namby-pamby" magazine, filled with "contemptible pictures, fashion-plates, music, and love-tales," but a magazine which uttered the thing for the thing's sake and told a story because it was a story rather than a hodge-podge which the public might claim it liked.

James E. Heath, writing to Poe concerning the "Fall of the House of Usher," said:

He [White, editor of the Southern Literary Messenger] *doubts whether the readers of the Messenger have much relish for tales of the German School, although written with great power and ability, and in this opinion, I confess to you frankly, I am strongly inclined to concur. I doubt very much whether tales of the wild, improbable, and terrible class can ever be permanently popular in this country. Charles Dickens it appears to me has given the final death-blow to writings of that description.*

Nevertheless, the writer-men of that day, who wrote the popular stories and received readier sales and fatter checks, are dead and forgotten and their stories with them, while Poe and the stories of Poe live on. In a way, this side of Poe's history is a paradoxical tangle. Editors did not like to publish his stories nor people to read them, yet they were read universally and discussed and remembered, and went the round of the foreign newspapers. They earned him little money, yet they have since earned a great deal of money and to this day command a large and steady sale. It was the common belief at the time they appeared that they could never become popular in the United States, yet their steady sales, complete editions, and what-not, which continue to come out, attest a popularity that is, to say the least, enduring. The sombre and terrible "Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," "Black Cat," "Cask of Amontillado," "Berenice," "Pit and the Pendulum," and "Masque of the Red Death" are read to-day with an eagerness as great as ever. And especially is this true of the younger generation which ofttimes places the seal of its approval on things the greybeards have read, approved, forgotten they have approved, and finally censured and condemned.

Yet the conditions which obtained in Poe's time obtain just as inexorably to-day. No self-respecting editor with an eye to the subscription-list can be bribed or bullied into admitting a terrible or tragic story into his magazine; while the reading public, when it does chance upon such stories in one way or another—and it manages to chance upon them somehow—says it does not care for them.

A person reads such a story, lays it down with a shudder, and says: "It makes my blood run cold. I never want to read anything like that again." Yet he or she will read something like that again, and again, and yet again, and return and read them over again. Talk with the average man or woman of the reading public and it will be found that they have read all, or nearly all, of the terrible and horrible tales which have been written. Also, they will shiver, express a dislike for such tales, and then proceed to discuss them with a keenness and understanding as remarkable as it is surprising.

When it is considered that so many condemn these tales and continue to read them (as is amply proved by heart-to-heart experience and by the book sales such as Poe's), the question arises: Are folk honest when they shudder and say they do not care for the terrible, the horrible, and the tragic? Do they really not like to be afraid? Or are they afraid that they do like to be afraid?

Deep down in the roots of the race is fear. It came first into the world, and it was the dominant emotion in the primitive world. To-day, for that matter, it remains the most firmly seated of the emotions. But in the primitive world people were un-complex, not yet self-conscious, and they frankly delighted in terror-inspiring tales and religions. Is it true that the complex, self-conscious people of to-day do not delight in the things which inspire terror? or is it true that they are ashamed to make known their delight?

What is it that lures boys to haunted houses after dark, compelling them to fling rocks and run away with their hearts going so thunderously pit-a-pat as to drown the clatter of their flying feet? What is it that grips a child, forcing it to listen to ghost stories which drive it into ecstasies of fear, and yet forces it to beg for more and more? Is it a baleful thing? a thing his instinct warns him as unhealthy and evil the while his desire leaps out to it? Or, again, what is it that sends the heart fluttering up and quickens the feet of the man or woman who goes alone down a long, dark hall or up a winding stair? Is it a stirring of the savage in them?—of the savage who has slept, but never died, since the time the river-folk crouched over the fires of their squatting-places, or the tree-folk bunched together and chattered in the dark?

Whatever the thing is, and whether it be good or evil, it is a thing and it is real. It is a thing Poe rouses in us, scaring us in broad day and throwing us into "admired disorders." It is rarely that the grown person who is afraid of the dark will make confessions. It does not seem to them proper to be afraid of the dark, and they are ashamed. Perhaps people feel that it is not proper to delight in stories that arouse fear and terror. They may feel instinctively that it is bad and injurious to have such emotions aroused, and because of this are impelled to say that they do not like such stories, while in actuality they do like them.

The great emotion exploited by Dickens was fear, as Mr. Brooks Adams has pointed out, just as courage was the great emotion exploited by Scott. The militant nobility seemed to possess an excess of courage and to respond more readily to things courageous. On the other hand, the rising bourgeoisie, the timid-merchant-folk and city-dwellers, fresh from the oppressions and robberies of their rough-handed lords, seemed to possess an excess of fear, and to respond more readily to things fearsome. For this reason they greedily devoured Dickens's writings, for he was as peculiarly their spokesman as Scott was the spokesman of the old and dying nobility.

But since Dickens's day, if we may judge by the editorial attitude and by the dictum of the reading public, a change seems to have taken place. In Dickens's day, the bourgeoisie, as a dominant class being but newly risen, had fear still strong upon it, much as a negro mammy, a couple of generations from Africa, stands in fear of the Voodoo. But to-day it would seem that this same bourgeoisie, firmly seated and triumphant, is ashamed of its old terror, which it remembers dimly, as it might a bad nightmare. When fear was strong upon it, it loved nothing better than fear-exciting things; but with fear far removed, no longer menaced and harassed, it has become afraid of fear. By this is meant that the bourgeoisie has become self-conscious, much in the same fashion that the black slave, freed and conscious of the stigma attached to "black," calls himself a colored gentleman, though in his heart of hearts he feels himself black nigger still. So the bourgeoisie may feel in a dim, mysterious way the stigma attached to the fear of its cowardly days, and, self-conscious, brands as improper all fear-exciting things, while deep down in its secret being it delights in them still.

All this, of course, is by the way—a mere tentative attempt to account for a bit of contradictory psychology in the make-up of the reading public. But the facts of the case remain. The public is afraid of fear-exciting tales and hypocritically continues to enjoy them. W. W. Jacobs's recent collection of stories, "The Lady of the Barge," contains his usual inimitable humorous yarns intersprinkled with several terror-tales. It was asked of a dozen friends as to which story had affected them the most forcibly, and the unanimous answer was, "The Monkey's Paw." Now the "Monkey's Paw" is as perfect a terror-tale as any of its kind. Yet, without exception, after duly and properly shuddering and disclaiming all liking for such tales, they proceeded to discuss it with a warmth and knowledge which plainly advertised that, whatever strange sensations it had aroused, they were at any rate pleasurable sensations.

Long ago, Ambrose Bierce published his *Soldiers and Civilians*, a book crammed from cover to cover with unmitigated terror and horror. An editor who dared to publish one of these tales would be committing financial and professional suicide; and yet, year after year, people continue to talk about *Soldiers and Civilians*, while the innumerable sweet and wholesome, optimistic, and happy-ending books are forgotten as rapidly as they leave the press.

In the rashness of youth before he became converted to soberer ways, Mr. W. C. Morrow was guilty of *The Ape, the Idiot, and Other People*, wherein are to be found some of the most horrible horror-stories in the English language. It made his instant reputation, whereupon he conceived higher notions of his art, forswore the terrible and the horrible, and wrote other and totally different books. But these other books are not remembered as readily as is his first one by the people who in the same breath say they do not like stories such as may be found in *The Ape, the Idiot, and Other People*.

Of two collections of tales recently published, each of which contained one terror-story, nine out of ten reviewers, in each instance, selected the terror-story as worthy of most praise, and, after they had praised, five out of the nine of them proceeded to damn it. Rider Haggard's *She*, which is filled with gruesome terror, had a long and popular vogue, while *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* achieved, if anything, a greater success and brought Stevenson to the front.

Putting the horror-story outside the pale, can any story be really great, the theme of which is anything but tragic or terrible? Can the sweet commonplaces of life be made into anything else than sweetly commonplace stories?

It would not seem so. The great short stories in the world's literary treasure-house seem all to depend upon the tragic and terrible for their strength and greatness. Not half of them deal

with love at all; and when they do, they derive their greatness, not from the love itself, but from the tragic and terrible with which the love is involved.

In this class may be ranked *Without Benefit of Clergy*, which is fairly typical. The love of John Holden and Ameera greatens because it is out of caste and precarious, and is made memorable by the tragic deaths of Tota and Ameera, the utter obliteration of the facts that they have lived, and the return of John Holden to his kind. Stress and strain are required to sound the deeps of human nature, and there is neither stress nor strain in sweet, optimistic, and placidly happy events. Great things can be done only under great provocation, and there is nothing greatly provoking in the sweet and placid round of existence. Romeo and Juliet are not remembered because things slipped smoothly along, nor are Abelard and Heloise, Tristram and Iseult, Paolo and Francesca.

But the majority of the great short stories do not deal with love. "A Lodging for the Night", for instance, one of the most rounded and perfect stories ever told, not only has no hint of love in it, but does not contain a hint of one character whom we would care to meet in life. Beginning with the murder of Thevenin, running through the fearful night in the streets and the robbing of the dead jade in the porch, and finishing with the old lord of Brisetout, who is not murdered because he possesses seven pieces of plate instead of ten, it contains nothing that is not terrible and repulsive. Yet it is the awfulness of it that makes it great. The play of words in the deserted house between Villon and the feeble lord of Brisetout, which is the story, would be no story at all were the stress and strain taken out of it and the two men placed vis-a-vis with a score of retainers at the old lord's back.

The "Fall of the House of Usher" depends upon all that is terrible for its greatness, and there is no more love in it than there is in Guy de Maupassant's "Necklace," or the "Piece of String," or in "The Man Who Was," and "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," which last is the most pitiful of all tragedies, a child's.

The editors of the magazines have very good reasons for refusing admission to the terrible and tragic. Their readers say they do not like the terrible and tragic, and that is enough, without going farther. But either their readers prevaricate most shamelessly or delude themselves into believing they tell the truth, or else the people who read the magazines are not the people who continue to buy, say, the works of Poe.

In the circumstances, there being a proved demand for the terrible and tragic, is there not room in the otherwise crowded field for a magazine devoted primarily to the terrible and tragic? A magazine such as Poe dreamed of, about which there shall be nothing namby-pamby, yellowish, or emasculated, and which will print stories that are bids for place and permanence rather than for the largest circulation?

On the face of it two things appear certain: That enough of that portion of the reading public which cares for the tragic and terrible would be sufficiently honest to subscribe; and that the writers of the land would be capable of supplying the stories. The only reason why such stories are not written to-day is that there is no magazine to buy them, and that the writer-folk are busy turning out the stuff, mainly ephemeral, which the magazines will buy. The pity of it is that the writer-folk are writing for bread first and glory after; and that their standard of living goes up as fast as their capacity for winning bread increases—so that they never get around to glory—the ephemeral flourishes, and the great stories remain unwritten.