

# POE'S IDEAL WORLD AS MANIFESTED IN HIS WINDOW IMAGERY

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## I

Window as imagery has often been used as connecting the inner and the outer worlds. Metaphorically, the two worlds may be interpreted to signify the ideality and the actuality in human life. This metaphorical implication has often been the underlying philosophy in many poetical excursions. In this essay, I attempt to show how Edgar Allan Poe uses this powerful window image in his poetry, and what is manifested through the image in relation to his poetic ideas.

A beautiful lady at a window is a stock image for the romantic poets. Keats writes:

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch  
Before the door had given her to his eyes;  
And from her chamber-window he would catch  
Her beauty farther than the falcon spies.<sup>1</sup>  
(*"Isabella"*, 17-20)

Shelley gives an expression to a window of a mistress's room:

I arise from dreams of thee,  
And a spirit in my feet  
Hath led me—who knows how?  
To thy chamber window, Sweet!  
(*"The Indian Serenade"*, 5-8)

When Poe writes that Baldazzar, in *"Politian,"* hears the beautiful voice of Lalage which comes through a window (III, 63), and likes to see her who is hidden by the

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lattice (III, 102), his window image is very similar to that in the two poems quoted above. The poet, in "To Helen," again uses this image, but his manipulation of the window image in this poem enables him to explore much wider sphere than could be done by the stock image. This poem deserves our full attention since the poet seems to manifest through this image his basic literary attitudes: his aspiration for the ideal beauty which is based on the recognition of the contrast between perpetuity and temporality, his keen interest in the process of mind's movement, and his return to reality after the flight to the imaginary world.

### II

Unlike Baldazzar, but like the speaker in Keats's poem quoted above, the persona in "To Helen" could clearly see his mistress through a window:

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche  
How statue-like I see thee stand.<sup>2</sup>  
(11-12)

Helen, whose beauty was the cause of the Trojan war, has retained her life in literature as a symbol of beauty. However, a great difference can be discerned between Homer's Helen and Poe's. While the former motivated Ulysses to leave Ithaca, the latter directs Poe's persona to come back to his "own native shore."<sup>3</sup> By making this change, Poe describes his attitudes towards poetry writing. It is clear that Helen's chamber is the final resting place for the persona and for the poet, not like inns which supply travellers with temporary rest during their journey. The poet's effort to write poetry is compared to a voyage, and the guiding principle throughout his poetical career is ideal beauty. This is evidenced by his own statement in "The Poetic Principle" when he defines the poem as "The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty." Out of biographical interest, many attempts have been made to identify "Helen" with actual woman in the poet's life. Mrs. Jane Smith Stanard, the mother of Poe's friend, and Mrs. Allan, the poet's foster-mother, are generally thought to be the source of inspiration.<sup>4</sup> However, it is clear that this poem is not just a praise of some particular woman. What the poet achieves here is rightly revealed by the following quotation from Byron's *Don Juan*, and interestingly enough, he uses exactly the same image

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as Poe's:

. . . in the niche  
A lovely statue we almost adore,  
This sort of adoration of the real  
Is but a heightening of the 'beau ideal.'<sup>5</sup>  
(II, 1685-88)

Poe might have started writing this poem with some real woman in mind, but what is more important is, by representing a woman as the manifestation of the immortal beauty, he is concretizing the "beau ideal."

The approach Poe seems to show in his search for the ideal is to have an open mind. It is only when we free ourselves from the barriers to the mind that the ideal character can be visualized. The ending lines of the poem read thus:

Ah, Psyche! from the regions which  
Are Holy Land.  
(14-15)

"Psyche" might signify Helen whose ethereal beauty is praised here, but at the same time, it refers to the poet's mind (since "psyche" means "soul") engaged in creation. The poet is concerned not only with what his mind creates, but also, and more importantly, with how it works. What the poet grasps at this ecstatic moment is the psychic movement which enables him to render ideal beauty. The window image in lines 11-12, quoted above, constitutes a key to reveal the function of the mind. Just as Ulysses' view is open to Helen, the poet's mind is to the ideal beauty. As long as the mind is enclosed within itself, we would not perceive anything except what the mind weaves, and it undoes the same, like Penelope's web. In order to enlarge our world, we should first remove the mind's bondages. Just as opening a window and looking through it is a spontaneous action, we have to take an initiative in starting the process of idealization.

It is not only Poe but also other romantic poets that use the window as symbol of one's mind. The window which opens to the ideal beauty finds another expression when Keats writes that the nightingale's song is equal to the one which "hath / Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" ("Ode to Nightingale," 68-70). Despite the difference in the usage of the window—in Poe,

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the ideal beauty is located inside the room and the perspective is narrowing, and in Keats, outside and widening. —the image is effective in both cases, in emphasizing the new view of the ideal. We find another example in his “Ode to Psyche”:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
That shadowy thought can win,  
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
To let the warm Love in!

(64-67)

Though not using the window image, Shelley, in his “Alastor; or Spirit of Solitude,” gives an expression to our mind. The place is described as “caves” covered with high trees:

The pyramids  
Of the tall cedar overarching, frame  
Most solemn domes within, and far below,  
Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,  
The ash and the acacia floating hang  
Tremulous and pale.

(433-38)

Caves resemble windows in that they also lead us to another dimension secluded from the surroundings. The word, “frame,” also allows us to include Shelley’s image under the same category of the window—mind. Then what has the frame got to do with the function of the mind? Let us explore the meaning of the window with its frame.

Shakespeare has many examples of eyes as windows: “Her two blue windows faintly she upheaveth” (*Venus and Adonis*, 482), “thy eyes’ windows fall / Like death when he shuts up the day of life” (*Romeo and Juliet*, IV, i, 101-2).<sup>7</sup> In his twenty-fourth sonnet, he manipulates the images of window, eye, and frame:

Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled  
Thy beauty’s form in table of my heart;  
My body is the frame wherein ‘tis held,  
And perspective it is best painter’s art.  
For through the painter must you see his skill  
To find where your true image pictured lies,  
Which in my bosom’s shop is hanging still,  
That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes.

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Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:  
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me  
Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun  
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.  
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art,  
They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

Read in the context of the whole sequence, this sonnet takes on more significance with regard to the function of the eyes. We know that the old poet's attempts to gain love from a youthful nobleman are all in vain. But as this sonnet clearly shows, the persona cannot help but praise the beauty of the partner. From this it can be generalized that our view is subjective and is sometimes distorted by our bias or prejudice, and therefore, the window frame appropriately denotes the mind whose boundaries are often decided by faulty sensory perceptions. A similar limitation of the senses can be seen in Blake:

This Lifes dim Windows of the Soul  
Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole  
And leads you to Believe a Lie  
When you see with not thro the Eye.<sup>8</sup>  
(“The Everlasting Gospel,” k, 97-100)

Here sensory eyes are clearly contrasted with spiritual “Eye.” We perceive things only through a veil which our eyes weave for our mind.

Now we have to consider the positive aspect of the window frame. Just as the frame for paintings that separates the world of the pictures from the surroundings, the window frame enables the viewer to focus on a smaller region and at the same time to see the object intensely. The poet in “To Helen” can be said to be a good painter. Poe's interest in painting is evidenced by his “The Landor's Cottage.” After describing the artist's task to “preserve a due medium between the neat and graceful,” and the “*pittoresque*,” he writes about the “marvellous *effect*” of the cottage located in the vale as lying in “its artistic arrangement *as a picture*.”<sup>9</sup> Not only for an evidence of the poet's interest in painting, but for other reasons this sketch is worth attention. Though it is based on the poet's own experience, and is a sheer rendering of the location and the inside of one actual cottage, the description of the place leading to the cottage shows a close resemblance to Shelley's symbolic caves: “The traces

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of light wheels were evident; and although the tall shrubberies and overgrown undergrowth met overhead, there was no obstruction whatever below." The description, "my path, for the last hour, had wound about and about so confusedly," leads us to associate his experience with the exploration of one's mind. The notion of the ideal varies from one person to another. It is only that we do not realize the ideal since its notion is hidden in our unconscious mind. In order to attain the ideal, first we have to explore our unconsciousness. The mental process could be visualized in Poe's sketch by the image of excursion through winding path to the destination—the ideal scenery. Also interestingly enough, the sketch ends with the description of open windows: "One or two small *bouquets* adorned the mantel; and late violets clustered about the open windows." As the editor of *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* points out, in the first publication of this sketch, the poet had intended to write a sequel to this, though indeed he did not. The symbolic meaning of the place must have greatly attracted the poet's mind.<sup>10</sup>

A close association of the window frame with the picture frame is clearly seen in the following example from Keats' letter to Fanny Keats, dated 13 March, 1819:

I should like the window to open unto the lake of Geneva—and there I'd sit and read  
all day like the picture of somebody reading.

What the writer looks for is quiet life, almost static as in a picture. The stasis of pictures leads us to a full understanding of Helen who is seen "statue-like" in a window-niche. The static quality of Helen is emphasized by the contrast with the turbulent life of the "weary, way-worn wanderer" on "desperate seas." It is clear, as James W. Gargano points out, that Poe's Helen has abandoned the classical attributes of destructiveness and sensuousness and has been transformed into a spiritual being.<sup>12</sup> By showing her as an object in painting, the poet succeeds not only in depriving her of physical or sensuous quality, but also in rendering the perpetuity of the ideal. It is not by a mere coincidence that Shelley describes a mysterious nature of the creatures which are reflected in a well in the caves:

. . . painted bird, sleeping beneath the moon,  
Or gorgeous insect floating motionless,  
Unconscious of the day, ere yet his wings  
Have spread their glories to the gaze of noon.

(465-68)

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The bird is "painted" and of course does not fly. The insect is "floating" but "motionless." Also the out-of-time-ness (as in Poe's "Dream-Land") is revealed by the co-existence of day and night ("the moon").

Aspiration for the perpetuity is a dialectical outcome of the recognition of the temporality of our life.<sup>13</sup> "The Raven" is a poem on the recongnition of time-boundness of our experience. It is important to note that this bird which brings in the crisis for the persona comes in through a window. The concept of mind as window applies here, too, since our perception of the real as well as of the ideal occurs only through the mind.<sup>14</sup> The persona of the poem seems to have been aspiring for creating an ideal world in an effort to transcend time. This is clear from his keeping a bust which, as an artistic work, lasts beyond time. Ironically, his crisis is heightened when the raven perches on the bust of Pallas—goddess of wisdom, and contrasts the time-bound-ness of our daily experience with the out-of-time-ness exemplified by the bust. Thus the poet seems to say the recognition of the nature of the two contrasting experiences is the true "wisdom."<sup>15</sup>

Another function of the window should be considered: that is, the separation of two worlds, the inner and the outer. This is clearly revealed by the following quotation from "Al Araaf." After describing the divine nature of the place, as follows,

A window of one circular diamond, there,  
Look'd out above into the purple air,  
And rays from God shot down that meteor chain  
And hallow'd all the beauty twice again,  
(180-83)

the poet continues:

. . . every sculptur'd cherub thereabout  
That from his marble dwelling peerèd out,  
Seem'd earthly in the shadow of his niche—  
(190-92)

Due to the window, the heavenly ("cherub") is rendered into the earthly, which clearly shows the separation of the two worlds. Just as so, the ideal world embodied by Helen is separated from Ulysses' plane. It should be remembered here that the persona in "To Helen" looks only through the window at his lady, who has been strong

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motivation or a good guide for his return journey. Poe's Ulysses finally comes back home, views her, but what is hinted here by the window image is that he is not let into the room to embrace his lover. He is located outside the window. The window works here as a hindrance for the outsider to go into the place. We see here the poet's effort to reach the ideal world, but he would not totally devote himself to it. It is interesting to recall the last stanza of "Ode to Nightingale" which immediately follows the description of the casement opening to the sea, quoted above :

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To tell me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
In the next valley-glades:  
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?  
(71-80)

Unlike the nightingale, the poet knows that he has to come back to the actuality. Both Keats and Poe aspire for something beyond the actual world and have a glimpse of it. But their flight from reality does not last long. Their view appears to be that the psyche's true function is maintained only with the balance between the real and ideal since the real existence functions as check to the mind which tends to go astray and lead one into meaningless fantasy. Therefore, like the traveller in the "Dream-Land," they come back to the reality. In this context, the underlying meaning of Poe's "The Raven" becomes significant. The placing of the bird on the bust emphasizes the close association between the two worlds as well as their contrast. The establishment of each world in true sense, depends on the understanding of the nature of the other. The world which the persona used to inhabit is far from being ideal since it is not based on the recognition of the true nature of his real existence. Only by seeing "through the eyes," as Blake recommends, we are enabled to have true knowledge. The former self of the persona depended on looking "with eyes" and therefore was enveloped by illusions. It is with the understanding of the limit of our existence that our quest for the ideal becomes genuine.

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Baldazzar is called by Castiglione a "dreamer" (I, 63), but he himself advises Politian, "Give not thy soul to dreams" (II, 21). If we add to this a condition, "unless they are based on the recognition of the reality contrasted with ideality," this appears to be the philosophy of Poe as he seeks for the ideal.

### NOTES

1. All subsequent poetical quotations from Keats and Shelley are from *John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley: Complete Works* (New York: Random House, Inc.).
2. All my quotations from Edgar Allan Poe's poems and his "The Poetic Principle," and "Philosophy of Composition" will be from *The Complete Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe with Three Essays on Poetry*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1909).
3. This is suggested by Warren S. Walker, "Poe's 'To Helen,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 72 (1957), 491-92.
4. Paul F. Baum, "Poe's 'To Helen,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 64 (1949), 289-97.
5. The quotation is from *The Complete Poetical Works of Byron*, ed. Paul E. More (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1933). According to Baum, Byron's *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* (III, xxiii) has been pointed out as a "palpable reminiscence" to Poe's passage (*Ibid.*, 294). However, the quotation from *Don Juan* shows closer reminiscence and is more relevant in the context.
6. Poe also uses the window image in "The Haunted Palace" and "Dream-Land" where the mind is represented as a building with windows, just as the turret of the House of Alma in *The Faerie Queene*, II, ix, 46-59.
7. All my quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: The Viking Press, 1979). Christopher Marlowe, contemporary of Shakespeare supplies us with another example of eyes as windows, though in this case doubly figurative, since the sun is compared to face: "Hide now thy stained face in endless night, / And shut the windows of the lightsome heavens!" (*The Tumberlaine the Great*, Part I, V, i, 292-93).
8. The quotation is taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).
9. The quotation is taken from *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), III.
10. "The Domain of Arnheim" also has a description of a cave-like place with a gate at the end opening to the "Paradise of Arnheim."
11. The quotation is taken from *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939).
12. James W. Gargano, "Poe's 'To Helen,'" *Modern Language Notes*, 75 (1960), 652-53.
13. E. San Juan, Jr. also points this out in "The Form of Experiences in the Poems of Edgar Allan Poe," *The Georgia Review*, 21 (1967), 71.
14. But Poe writes, in his "Philosophy of Composition," that the introducing the raven through a window was meant to increase the reader's curiosity and to make the lover imagine that

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was his mistress's spirit.

15. Poe states only that Pallas was chosen "as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself."