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Fearing Water: Eco-gothic ripples of Edgar Allan Poe on the environmental crisis

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## Abstract

Fear of nature is central to many Western narratives, and the Romantic period, with its double-edged take on the sublime and wilderness, is particularly fertile in this topos, especially entangling it with Gothic elements and settings. Nonetheless, the immense, ominous mystery of the water, where psychoanalytical motifs permeate an ecogothic potential, remain mostly unexplored. In US Literature, of late, several scholarly studies have taken the maritime turn and related it to ecocriticism (Blum 2010), but this study proposes to narrow down on the centrality of water symbolism, on the one hand, and on the “social construction” of water courses, on the other, in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Studying them from an ecocritical, eco-gothic angle, I hope to showcase how Poe’s narrative and poetic experiments, symbols and instigations of mystery and horror (entrapments, shipwrecks, whirlpools, destruction of bodies and buildings by water) speak to our idea of climate crisis today. This dissertation aims to demonstrate the significance of literature beyond its pages, exploring how it affects readers in ways that extend far beyond simple storytelling. The first chapter examines ecocriticism, its various facets, and its objectives, followed by a geographical and social overview of the nineteenth century to provide a concrete context for understanding the connection between real-world conditions and literary production. Subsequently, the focus shifts to maritime and Gothic literature, situating Edgar Allan Poe within these traditions. Later chapters analyze Poe’s poetry—including *The City in the Sea*, *To the River*, and *Dream-Land*—and his narratives, such as “MS. Found in a Bottle”, *A Descent into the Maelström*, and *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, all written between 1830 and 1850. This analysis emphasizes the interplay between fear, emotional effect, and the public perception of climate and anthropogenic issues as reflected in his works.

The explicit feelings of terror towards water in the abovementioned works become a source of anxiety and fear for characters and readers alike — for instance, partaking of a sense of loss in the “swelling of the black stupendous seas” of the Antarctic Sea in “Ms. Found in a Bottle”. My intention is to develop a two-thronged approach to my corpus: a symbolic-psychoanalytical analysis of instances of fear of water, and an

attention to geographical location of some of the texts and the material conditions of climate science in Poe's time and how they relate with ours.

The first chapter of this work will be devoted to definition and methods in the fields of ecocriticism, eco-gothic, and horror as a narrative tool. Poe's poetry and short narratives will be the subject of the next chapters respectively. Having examined how fear of water is subsumed in Poe's work, I intend to narrow down the significance of water symbolism by analyzing Poe's use of water in its many states and the link it has in its landscape and the fear and mystery of the narrative.

Understanding the theory of the emotional state of fear will help further Poe's implications of eco-gothic literature and its effect on the reader. Therefore, the following chapter will focus on the psychoanalytical motifs of the state of fear and its emotional implications on the reader. Furthermore, understanding the mechanisms of fear of water in the readers affect response, this dissertation aims to argue in favour of literature's influence on the ecological movement and its real-life consequences. The final section of this dissertation will thus aim to understand society's perception of climate issues considering the implications of the analysis behind such symbolism and the likely contribution of Edgar Allan Poe to "speculative fabulation" (Haraway 02) through the conflict and fears of its characters.

Key words: ecocriticism; Edgar Allan Poe; Water, Environmental crisis; Gothic Literature.

## Resumo

O medo da natureza é central em muitas narrativas ocidentais, e o período romântico, com sua visão ambivalente do sublime e da natureza selvagem, é particularmente fértil nesse tópico, especialmente ao entrelaçá-lo com elementos e cenários góticos. No entanto, o imenso e ominoso mistério da água, onde motivos psicanalíticos permeiam um potencial ecogótico, permanece em grande parte inexplorado. Na literatura dos EUA, recentemente, diversos estudos acadêmicos adotaram a virada marítima e a relacionaram com a ecocrítica (Blum 2010), mas este estudo propõe-se a concentrar-se na centralidade do simbolismo da água, por um lado, e na “construção social” dos cursos d’água, por outro, nas obras de Edgar Allan Poe. Estudando-as a partir de uma perspectiva ecocrítica e ecogótica, espero mostrar como as experiências narrativas e poéticas de Poe, seus símbolos e provocações de mistério e horror (aprisionamentos, naufrágios, redemoinhos, destruição de corpos e construções pela água) dialogam com nossa concepção atual da crise climática. Esta dissertação tem como objetivo demonstrar a importância da literatura para além de suas páginas, explorando como ela afeta os leitores de maneiras que vão muito além da simples narrativa. O primeiro capítulo examina a ecocrítica, suas diversas facetas e objetivos, seguido por uma visão geral geográfica e social do século XIX, a fim de fornecer um contexto concreto para compreender a conexão entre as condições do mundo real e a produção literária. Em seguida, o foco se desloca para a literatura marítima e gótica, situando Edgar Allan Poe dentro dessas tradições. Os capítulos seguintes analisam a poesia de Poe — incluindo *The City in the Sea*, *To the River* e *Dream-Land* — e suas narrativas, como “MS. Found in a Bottle”, *A Descent into the Maelström* e *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, todas escritas entre 1830 e 1850. Essa análise enfatiza a interação entre o medo, o efeito emocional e a percepção pública das questões climáticas e antropogênicas refletidas em suas obras.

Os sentimentos explícitos de terror em relação à água nas obras mencionadas tornam-se uma fonte de ansiedade e medo tanto para os personagens quanto para os leitores — por exemplo, ao experimentar a sensação de perda no “inchar dos mares negros e estupendos” do Mar Antártico em “MS. Found in a Bottle”. Minha intenção é desenvolver uma abordagem dupla para meu corpus: uma análise simbólico-

psicanalítica das manifestações do medo da água e uma atenção à localização geográfica de alguns textos e às condições materiais da ciência climática na época de Poe, relacionando-as com as nossas.

O primeiro capítulo deste trabalho será dedicado à definição e aos métodos nos campos da ecocrítica, ecogótico e do horror enquanto ferramenta narrativa. A poesia e as narrativas curtas de Poe serão o tema dos capítulos seguintes, respectivamente. Após examinar como o medo da água está incorporado na obra de Poe, pretendo aprofundar a significância do simbolismo da água, analisando seu uso em seus diversos estados, a ligação com a paisagem e o medo e mistério da narrativa.

Compreender a teoria do estado emocional do medo ajudará a ampliar as implicações da literatura ecogótica de Poe e seu efeito sobre o leitor. Portanto, o capítulo seguinte se concentrará nos motivos psicanalíticos do estado do medo e suas implicações emocionais para o leitor. Além disso, ao entender os mecanismos do medo da água na resposta afetiva do leitor, esta dissertação pretende argumentar a favor da influência da literatura no movimento ecológico e suas consequências na vida real. A seção final desta dissertação buscará, assim, compreender a percepção social das questões climáticas considerando as implicações da análise por trás de tal simbolismo e a provável contribuição de Edgar Allan Poe para a “fabulação especulativa” (Haraway 02) por meio dos conflitos e medos de seus personagens.

Palavras chave: Ecocrítica; Edgar Allan Poe; Água, Ecologia, literatura gótica.

## Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, I have led a life that many might describe as adventurous. Through school, work, and personal exploration, I have lived in multiple countries, each with its own unique social, economic, and environmental characteristics. These years have undoubtedly been some of the most formative of my life, offering both rich experiences and a heightened awareness of the persistent environmental challenges faced by the communities I have encountered. Living amid such diverse contexts has cultivated a deep passion for understanding humanity's relationship with the natural world, yet for a long time I struggled to find a way to translate this interest into meaningful academic inquiry.

It was through my studies that I began to recognize literature as a particularly powerful avenue for exploring these concerns. Literary works offer more than aesthetic pleasure; they provide a lens through which we can examine ecological issues, reflect on human vulnerability, and confront the moral and ethical dimensions of our interactions with nature. By connecting my personal experiences with literary analysis, I realized that authors like Edgar Allan Poe employ narrative, symbolism, and Gothic elements that could depict humanity's complex and often fraught relationship with the natural environment. This insight has shaped the focus of my research, allowing me to explore how literature not only reflects environmental anxieties but also cultivates awareness and understanding of our place within the natural world.

While reflecting on past mistakes is valuable, and while this research itself involves revisiting challenges and uncertainties, the most important goal for me is to envision and work toward a better future. By learning from our fears, errors, and the narratives we encounter, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of environmental crises and to spark meaningful conversations around these urgent issues. Literature, with its power to cast light on both human vulnerability and our relationship with the natural world, can serve as a catalyst for awareness and action, and maybe even encourage readers to consider not only what has gone wrong but also what might be done differently to foster a more sustainable and responsible engagement with our environment.

Discovering the field of ecocriticism was profoundly reassuring, as it provided a framework for exploring a topic I had long felt passionate about but had not known how to articulate or investigate academically. This discipline allowed me to consider the ways literature reflects, interrogates, and shapes human relationships with the natural world, including the ethical and psychological dimensions of environmental interaction.

Given my focus on the juncture of ecocriticism and fear, selecting Poe as the subject of this study was a natural choice. His works frequently explore the psychological and physical impact of encountering overwhelming natural forces, making them particularly rich for an analysis through an eco-gothic lens. By examining the role of fear in his narratives, this research aims to demonstrate how Poe's heightened depictions of suspense and horror within the natural environment engage readers with tangible ecological themes. Understanding fear as both an emotional and cognitive experience allows for a deeper interpretation of Poe's potential eco-gothic literature, revealing how his portrayal of nature's power, unpredictability, and moral indifference can shape the reader's perception of human vulnerability. In this way, ecocriticism provides the tools to explore how Poe might provoke a reflection on humanity's ecological responsibilities and ethical engagement with the nonhuman world.

The value of connecting Gothic narratives with ecocriticism lies in its dual capacity: it reflects the environmental anxieties present in Poe's time while also providing a foundation for examining similar concerns in contemporary literature. By studying how authors of the past grappled with nature's power and unpredictability, we gain insight into the cultural and psychological dimensions of ecological fear, creating a framework for understanding ongoing environmental crises. Water, in particular, proved central to this research due to its inherent duality. It embodies both life and death, sustenance and destruction, fertility and disaster. Being surrounded by water underscores humanity's dependence on natural systems while simultaneously highlighting vulnerability to forces beyond human control. In Poe's narratives, this duality amplifies the Gothic tension, demonstrating how ecological and psychological anxieties can intersect to shape both story and reader experience.

With this framework in mind, the study now turns to a close reading of selected works in which Poe's maritime landscapes and Gothic elements converge to create both terror and reflection. Beginning with *Dream-Land*, followed by *The City in the Sea*,

“Annabel Lee”, and “MS. Found in a Bottle”, these texts illustrate how water, as both a literal and symbolic force, shapes human experience, evokes fear, and underscores the ethical and ecological dimensions of humanity’s interaction with the natural world. Each work provides a distinct perspective on the emotional and environmental stakes of confronting nature, allowing the reader to trace recurring themes of ecophobia, vulnerability, and ecological awareness across Poe’s creations.

### **Chapter 1: Ecocriticism and its different streams: The correlation of the Anthropocene and Ecohorror in nature writing**

In an era defined by climate change, ecological degradation, and increasing awareness of humanity’s impact on the planet, literature has become a critical lens through which to examine our relationship with the natural world. The intersection between the Anthropocene—a concept originating in the earth sciences—and literature has gained increasing attention in literary and cultural studies. The rise of nature writing in North America coincided with the Industrial Revolution and arguably emerged from a growing concern for human interactions with the environment.

As these concerns became more urgent, ecocriticism and its fundamental principles emerged as crucial for understanding the correlation between human beings and the natural world. This interdisciplinary approach seeks to explore the links between self, society, nature, and literature by examining and analyzing texts to identify and interpret the dynamics between human and nonhuman entities. As Cheryll Glotfelty famously explains, “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, p. 18). By providing this framework, ecocriticism enables readers and critics to move beyond an unconcerned or anthropocentric agenda, offering instead a way of critically engaging with the narratives that shape our understanding of ecological crisis and human responsibility.

So that we may understand and study what has been happening to the Earth’s environment through its geological timeline, the International Union of Geological Sciences developed a system that came to be known as the geologic time scale. Although

the original concept dates much further back, the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the term Holocene as the “period Beginning around 11,000 years ago and continuing to the present”, which is the current geological time-period we live in. In contrast, the Anthropocene is supposed to be a time-period that highlights the significant and often negative impact of human activities on Earth's geology and ecosystems, especially since the Industrial Revolution which is an important point in time to this study. While the term "Anthropocene" was introduced by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 to indicate the human influence on the planet, it has not been formally confirmed by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (Crutzen 14)<sup>1</sup>.

As the Earth experiences devastating floods in Brazil and extreme heat in India, the melting of the Arctic has become an undeniable reality that humanity has long resisted acknowledging. As we suffer from real time climate change today, the necessity to understand and protect the ecological system has grown more important than ever. Environmental concerns have now been given increased attention worldwide. However, although these issues are noticeable in today's society, they are not problems that have begun recently, but a consequence of years of neglect. Cheryll Glotfelty states in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader*,

“After 1750 global exploration and colonization by ‘Western powers promoted dynamic new ideas in the natural sciences, as major discoveries enlarged known space and time [...] As a vernacular science, ecology was widely adopted by many disciplines to read, interpret, and narrate land history. Rapid settlement and spoil age of American land after 1900 spurred the rise of resource conservation in forestry and fishery, as ecological concepts of association, climax, and niche arose to describe the biomes of eastern forest and western grasslands.” (Glotfelty, 74).

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion around the knowledge of this time period is an interesting one. The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) voted against the creation of the term Anthropocene to describe a time period, although they retain that the concept still applies. According to their view, the human impact on the environment increased a large amount after the Industrial Revolution. In the Science Direct Article title Comment to the ICS Anthropocene decision: From stratigraphy to storytelling Havard Kilhavn concludes that the term remains a useful definition as it allows researchers to write about systems in the past that could still be relatable to today's society

This is to show that there is a rising need to study society and ecological concepts concomitantly. Such ecological concerns, though widely examined in other fields of study, can also be productively addressed through literary analysis. The concept of the Anthropocene recognizes that human activity has altered the planet so profoundly that the Earth now exists under constant human influence. While topics like global warming and ecological issues have only recently gained popularity in the mainstream, the Holocene, which began over 11,000 years ago, laid the foundations for human civilization, with population growth, intensive farming, and new energy sources gradually affecting the planet's systems (Walker et al. 3). Poe's narratives and poems studied in this research can be used as good examples of the relationship between nature and humans. The gothic root of his writings will naturally highlight the patterns and consequences the damage this relationship causes to the environment, especially considering the power-shift between man and nature that was starting to become prominent during his time writing. Beyond that, this broken relationship reflects what critics call ecohorror, where nature itself becomes frightening because of environmental damage.

Ecohorror is a branch of horror that explores the aspects of the natural world and ecological disaster, it often portrays nature as a character that brings dread, destruction, or even revenge towards the human characters. Ecohorror is an important field of study because it reflects humanity's anxieties about the consequences of irreversible environmental damage, particularly the fear that environmental catastrophes could threaten both human habitats and modern comforts. As Dawn Keetley explains, ecohorror "emerges where the natural world is represented as monstrous and where human existence is threatened by ecological forces that have become strange, unknowable, or overwhelming" (Keetley, 3). Poe's work embodies traditional horror storytelling and, as will be discussed later, can be read as reflecting contemporary environmental anxieties while also provoking fear about a future shaped by humanity's failure to correct its mistakes. Ecohorror, therefore, is able to gather a wide range of literature because it can both address current fears but also past fears. However, more than a simple representation of mankind's anxieties, horror and ecohorror can also be used as a cultural study of what were at the time period. If we use ecohorror to understand popular literature of the time, we may find a very close parallel to the issues

the society of the time was going through.

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, with the invention of the steam engine, western political powers began to engage in worldwide exploration and colonialism, which resulted in a significant development of new concepts about natural sciences and environment. The quick rise of industrialized nations caused immediate harm to the Earth, resulting in rapid changes in the living environment and circumstances for human survival. Glotfelty states: "Within a century, scientists charted ocean currents, traced the ice ages, found the site of Troy and the remains of Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon people. These events prompted other ways to read the earth, peering into 'prehistory,' the time before writing existed" (Glotfelty, 74). If we understand the Anthropocene as a period that highlights the negative human impact on the environment, from what was stated previously, we can see how Poe's work can be a good source of data to study those impacts. Horror produces, in this sense, the mirror through which we see the fears of a society at a specific time-period. The anxieties about the environment that are seen through the lens of ecohorror, often deferred the problem to an outside source. As a practice, ecohorror can be studied through the discipline of ecocriticism, which is the point of this project in the sense that it helps interpret the textual corpus. For some literary critics, including Glen Love and Cheryl Glotfelty, ecocriticism is a critical and educational expansion of literary studies to incorporate works about the nonhuman world and our relationship to it. The quick rise of industrialized nations caused immediate harm to the Earth, resulting in rapid changes in the living environment and circumstances for human survival. Glotfelty declares that "The years of Depression and World War II turned ecology even more strongly toward public narrative, for in crossing boundaries it resisted the managerial aspect of conservation and challenged its support of resource-extractive industries" (74). As a result, while discussing ecology, it is critical to grasp how historical events continuously alter our narratives and knowledge of ecology and nature.

The study of literature through an environmental lens, known as ecocriticism, provides a framework for analyzing how texts depict nature and ecological relationships. William Howarth states that "ecocriticism seeks to redirect humanistic ideology, not spurning the natural sciences but using their ideas to sustain viable readings. Literature and science trace their roots to the hermeneutics of religion and law, the sources for

early ideas of time and space, or history and property" (quoted in Glotfelty, 15). In a similar way, Buell emphasizes that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (Buell, 20). In 2005, Buell divided the development of ecocriticism into a first and second wave. He writes in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*:

No definitive map of environmental criticism in literary studies can [...] be drawn. Still, one can identify several trend-lines marking an evolution from a "first wave" of ecocriticism to a "second" or newer revisionist wave or waves increasingly evident today. This first- second wave distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong, and most forms of second-wave revisionism involve building on as well as quarreling with precursors. In this sense, "palimpsest" would be a better metaphor than "wave." (17)

The first wave of ecocriticism, traced back to Buell's own work, consisted of a concern akin to 19<sup>th</sup> century nature writing by the likes of Emerson and Thoreau. It was then exponentiated by the severity of the environmental catastrophe, which conversely questioned the power and limits of human imagination. This prompted the exploration of new perceptions in order to understand mankind's interaction with the environment and therefore, how nature was perceived in literature. This wave still stressed the cultural differences between humans and nature while emphasizing the significance of nature. However, the second wave of ecocriticism concentrated more on the links between literary theory and science with a particular emphasis on ecology and environmental biology. It focuses on the application of scientific theory and physical techniques to environmental and climatic problems. Ecocriticism thus emerges as a framework that challenges the longstanding ideology of human dominance over nature, redirecting thought toward principles grounded in the natural sciences and toward more

sustainable modes of understanding human–environment relations. In this respect, literature serves as both a research and teaching tool for innovative ideas, and the purpose of ecocriticism

is to examine the evolution and trajectory of how the general public learns about these themes through literature. Like the first wave of ecocriticism, the second wave also gives importance to local and community oriented ecological issues, but unlike the first wave, the second wave is more proactive in terms of the impact on global forces.

Having outlined the principles of ecocriticism, it is useful to examine nature writing, a genre that has long reflected humanity's evolving relationship with the environment and provides a practical lens for understanding ecological themes in literature. When discussing the limits imposed by nature to the growth of human tempering, Buell states "Since the old dream of bending nature to our will (through genetic technology, for instance) also continues to run strong in late twentieth-century American culture, we may expect the oscillation between utopian and dystopian scenarios that began in the last century to continue unabated into the next as the switch flicks back and forth depending on whatever scientific breakthrough or technological foul-up dominates public attention. That is both a burden and a blessing" (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 308). The North American idealization of a harmonious relationship between nature and urban life is the root of pastoralism. While pastoral literature can be about the environment, it sometimes implies a political attitude of separation between human and nature that can have profound environmental implications.

Nature writing was developed in the United States in the 19th century as essentially an anti-industrialist stance. "Nature writing in America in the late nineteenth century [...] in turn reflected the rise of preservationist and (more broadly) anti-industrialist sentiment" (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 351). Moreover, it was connected to the pastoral tradition, which Leo Marx suggested could lead to a romanticized view of nature, often ignoring led to a romanticized view of nature often ignores the complexities of environmental issues. Pastoral art was mostly an urban style that represented life in the countryside as tranquil and lovely, which was rarely ever the case. As Buell notes:

"Hence the theory that American idealization of nature and wilderness has

acted as a kind of moral tonic or social conscience has come to seem increasingly suspect— not that the various challenges to it form a united front. Neither the feminist critique of androcentric wilderness narrative nor the critique of pastoral as the idyllic face of settler-culture expansionism is internally monolithic, and they differ between and among themselves on such points as how far to press the distinction between major male writers generally” (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 22).

This demonstrates that the discourse around pastoral and nature writing has never been uniform, but rather shaped by multiple, sometimes conflicting critiques. The balance of nature and mankind that pastoral art often wished to represent inspired, nonetheless, early twentieth-century ecologists and late twentieth-century ecocritics (Kricher 2009).

Jamie Lorimer's *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* (2015) describes "the modern figure of Nature" as "a single, timeless, and pure domain untouched by Society, or at least the actions of modern humans" (1-2). This concept refers to the way nature has been viewed separately from humans in an idealized state. Lorimer, on the other hand, sees the Anthropocene as representing a distinct universe: "This world is hybrid - neither social nor natural" (2). The term Anthropocene has altered the scope of literature, bringing into it an acute awareness of the environment as integral and intra-actant with the human, and changing also the outlook of "nature writing" as it reflects on the natural world, drawing connections between human and nonhuman life and at the same time raising awareness of ecological issues. The Anthropocene writings on nature mark a new era in the American tradition, challenging certain attitudes, beliefs, and topics that are often seen as basic to the American branch of the genre. The narrative structures of the key texts by Poe that will be analyzed in this study were selected on account of this new angle: how a vision of nature as "essentially nonhuman" is replaced by an understanding of the wide-ranging and multiform entanglements between industrial humans and nature, as claimed by the current proponents of the Anthropocene. This awareness eventually undoes what Lorimer refers to as the "Nature-Society binary" (2) that instead highlights the interconnection between human and nature.

Poe's works have recently been examined through the lens of ecocriticism,

emphasizing the intricate relationship between human and nonhuman entities and exploring how literature can reflect broader ecological and emotional connections. In “The Philosophy of Composition”, Poe famously addressed the reader's effect on the meaning of his work, demonstrating a profound understanding of the interplay between textual symbolism and audience perception. He opposes that the emotional reactions evoked by readers, like grief, melancholy, or a profound sensation of awe, are not accidental but form the very process via which the poem achieves its symbolic resonance. In *The Raven*, for example, Poe purposefully constructs the story and uses repeated themes to influence the reader's emotions, ensuring that the eponymous bird becomes a potent symbol of sorrow, loss, and the unknown. This repetitiveness is most evident, not only in the themes of sorrow, “Eagerly I wished the morrow; — vainly I had sought to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow — sorrow for the lost Lenore” (“The Raven”, line 10), but also in how the raven repetitive shouts “Nevermore”. Professor Vale de Gato's article “Neither Brute nor Human” examines how Poe uses symbolism and effect in *The Raven* to suggest that the bird represents external forces beyond the speaker. Vale de Gato explains that “these images suggest that the decomposition process shared with animals is ever more certain than our divine progress, posing a threat not only to the Enlightenment ideals of knowledge and the notion of scientific advance that underpinned the Industrial Revolution, but also to the Romantic image of the divinely inspired poet” (Vale de Gato 33). In other words, the article emphasizes that human will and achievement may be outlasted by both predator and parasite. This reading aligns with Poe's discussion in “The Philosophy of Composition”, demonstrating that, like his other natural characters, the raven may function as a symbolic catalyst for exploring themes of terror, grief, and loss.

In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe further emphasized the careful planning of his writing, including elements such as tone, length, and thematic focus, with particular attention to producing a specific emotional “effect.” This approach might be used as argument that literature can shape the human perception of the environment. By ensuring that landscapes, seascapes, and other environmental elements are not mere backdrops but central to the narrative, Poe's method highlights the power of setting to evoke emotional responses and engage readers with ecological concerns. In this way, the deliberate construction of mood and effect in his works allows the natural world to

function as an active force within the story, reflecting human vulnerability and emphasizing the moral and psychological significance of humanity's relationship with nonhuman systems.

Nothing is clearer than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything is attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of its highest manifestation—and all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones. (Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*)

This type of symbolism that Poe develops in “The Raven” also appears in his other works. For example, the repetition of the word “nevermore” in *The Raven* illustrates what Poe calls “the effect of this originality of combination ... aided by other unusual and some altogether novel effects, arising from an extension of the application of the principles of rhyme and alliteration” (“The Philosophy of Composition”, 21). A similar reliance on repetition can be found in “Annabel Lee”, a piece we will analyze in greater detail in chapter three. By examining how Poe uses repetition alongside the symbolism in his writing, we can better understand the significance of ecocriticism in his work — particularly how water functions as a recurring symbol. This connection is important because it allows us to link Poe's symbolism to more recent studies in the subfield of “blue ecocriticism”.

Blue Ecocriticism is a strand of ecocriticism very much oriented towards new materialism and posthumanism, promoting a common ground in the environmental humanities that connects the environmental crisis to hydro-cultural issues. Sydney Dobrin presents an argument in his *Blue Ecocriticism and Oceanic Imperative* book that

is very relevant to this thesis, and that is that traditionally, ecocriticism has favored terrestrial environments, with only a small minority of ecocritical work being focused on the ocean. He writes “That is, blue ecocriticism is at once an attempt to emphasize the significantly overlooked importance of ocean in ecocritical work and to call to question the critical function of doing so. Simultaneously, blue ecocriticism strives to consider the ramifications of those representations of ocean upon and within cultural imaginaries and to provide what might be thought of as an oceanic fluency” (Dobrin, 8). Dobrin believes that it is necessary to understand how depictions of the ocean are scaled, mediated by ideological assumptions, and the limitations of human perception. To expand, Dobrin states that:

“The opportunity to consider the role of institutionalized order by way of discipline in how we might achieve a more encompassing consideration of ocean not merely in literary studies, but as saturated throughout all disciplinary perspectives. In doing so, blue ecocriticism considers the historical positioning and construction of ocean in Western thought and ecocritical approaches” (“Blue Ecocriticism and The Oceanic Imperative”, 8).

Dobrin therefore maintains that world and text are inextricably linked, and that blue ecocriticism examines both the world as represented in language and the physical world itself. In this context, and when we investigate the ocean as an object in literary imagination in this study, it will be clear how viewing the ocean as a site of environmental difficulties is part of ecocriticism. This is important because, like Dobrin states, we aim to take up possession of ocean as an object and place and not as a living organism, and through the analysis of Poe’s works, ask the question on how is the ocean represented and what it can teach us.

As we begin to connect environmental literature with blue ecocriticism, the next step in this study is understanding Edgar Allan Poe's participation in it is the concept of ecohorror. However, before diving into Poe, this association of environment and horror is not new or necessarily only applied to Poe. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for instance, can be considered a prototype of ecohorror, since the gothic novel's main character is a mad scientist who plays a part in life and death. It is also, surely, an example of eco-

gothic, a term that, according to Simon Stok, focuses on the “contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (2009: 207), and therefore is very similar to ecohorror. However, ecohorror in the Anthropocene isn't limited to science. The worries of eco-gothic texts are increasingly shifting away from mad scientists and toward more environmental dangers, such as animal assaults, pollution, and severe weather. Ecohorror in the Anthropocene depicts a transformed planet as terrifying rather than promising, reflecting both current atrocities and those we dread may occur in the future.

As we turn to Edgar Allan Poe's work, it is necessary to outline some of the key underpinnings of the eco-gothic. This mode highlights possible links between the study of fear and ecocriticism, both of which grapple with questions about how humans can live with and understand the environment around them. Within the eco-gothic, fear is not merely a source of horror but functions as a critical device that raises awareness of ecological anxieties and the precariousness of human–nature relations. According to Andrew Smith and William Hughes, eco-gothic fiction portrays nature as “a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological.” Therefore, it has the potential to mediate fears about climate change and environmental damage in industrial societies (Smith and Hughes 3). Having in common with ecohorror a dual contempt and fear of the natural environment, eco-gothic fiction is arguably more attuned with the unconscious and the psychological strain of our environmental impact, which in turn are linked with the concept of ecophobia. According to Sharae Deckard in “Eco gothic in the Twenty-First Century,”:

“Eco-gothic turns around the uncanny manifestation of the ‘environmental unconscious’, particularly those forms of environmental violence or crisis that have been occulted. [...] Eco-phobic narratives are suffused with effects of loathing, fear, disgust and horror, traversing environments imbued with knowing malevolence, and often attribute a capacity for retribution to a vengeful Nature, personified as an antagonist or opponent” (Deckard, 1).

This is an idea that is attuned with the themes of Poe's writings and will be explored further in this research.

While Eco gothic stresses the psychological and unconscious aspects of

environmental dread, ecophobia offers a perspective on the cultural and moral consequences of humanity's strained connection with nature. Estok highlights in his work *Gothic Nature*:

“Ecophobia needs theorizing, and the eco-Gothic is a very good lens through which to begin such focusing because it allows us to describe some very specific aspects of the eco-phobic imagination. The imagining of nature as a menacing threat is central to eco-Gothic texts. The menace can (and often does) involve the idea of nature as an agent bent on vengeance. An agential nature is menacing in itself; a vengeful one is truly horrifying” (Estok, 41).

This dynamic is obvious throughout Poe's writings, particularly his maritime and water-centered stories: water is more than a background; it is a force capable with moral indifference, unpredictability, and concealed danger. By looking at Poe through these lenses, we can see how his Gothic imagination turns natural elements into agents of dread, it expresses both individual fears and greater social concerns about ecological instability and human fragility. This sets the scenario for examining his poetry and prose, in which the symbolic and emotional weight of nature, particularly the sea, exposes the connections of terror, environmental concern, and ecophobia.

The concept of ecophobia comes from Estok's book *Ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction*, 2009. In his work, Estok discusses ecophobia as more than just fear, but as a tendency to undervalue nature and exploit ecosystems. By applying Estok's concept of ecophobia to Poe, we can better understand how his Gothic imagination reveals not just individual fears, but broader cultural anxieties about nature's uncontrollability and hostility. Edgar Allan Poe's works is a good example of this idea of ecophobia, specifically towards water, as it often reflects an ambivalent and uneasy relationship it, which can be interpreted through the lens of ecophobia. In this context, ecophobia manifests as fear, hostility, or an unsettling aversion to the natural world, particularly its chaotic and uncontrollable aspects.

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This idea that nature is not a neutral or gentle force but a powerful and often terrifying existence that challenges human dominance is established in eco-gothic and eco-phobic narratives. By turning nature into an active, sometimes even malevolent character, these narratives manage to reflect on deep-seated fears about the environment and humanity's impact on it, blending ecological concerns with the psychological force of gothic fiction. Some of Poe's poems like "The City in the Sea" are a good representation of this idea. While it might seem God-like, the character of the sea has a very active presence in the poem, contributing significantly to the apocalyptic momentum of the poem.

In *The Threshold between Life and Death': Poe's Gothic and the Ecology of the In-Between*, Liz Butter has examined the gothic effects in Poe's tales of immortality, their link between life and death and the representation of life in these relations as a means of exploration the abstracts aspect of eco-gothic. Both ecohorror and eco-gothic highlight the strangeness and horror of living in an age where man's prowess has threatened the environment that sustains him and how, we as humans, engage with the natural world. Although it may be impossible to know for certain if Poe's intentions were these, analyzing his works with this discourse offers an opportunity to rethink and reenact the ways we might face ecological crisis as a society. The concept of immortality often intersects with themes of decay and death. Poe explores these topics often in his work, for instance, "The City in the Sea", which holds the idea of immortality in an indirect relation to decay as the city's descent into the sea may symbolize death.

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<sup>2</sup> While classic gothic literature employs narrative devices such as supernatural activity, mystery, nightmares and melodrama, eco-gothic tales repurpose these same narrative plots to delve into different historical periods, viewing disasters as an ongoing phenomenon. Sharae Deckard writes on her essay *Eco-gothic in the Twenty-First Century*: "Eco-phobic narratives are suffused with effects of loathing, fear, disgust and horror, traversing environments imbued

with knowing malevolence, and often attribute a capacity for retribution to a vengeful Nature, personified as an antagonist or opponent. If gothic is characterized by excess, in eco-gothic, land- and water-scapes are themselves extreme, sites of monstrous fecundity that seemingly threaten human civilization, where vines and vegetation run rampant, where decay ferments and festers, or where plagues and vermin spread deliriums. Rather than reduced to a backdrop onto which to project psychosocial or cultural fears, nature itself becomes a character, often embodied in spirit-form" (Deckard, 1).

Similarly, many themes of Poe's work functions as ecohorror triggers, such as the representation of nature as a powerful and sometimes malicious force and the blurring of natural and supernatural realms, as seen in "A Descent into the Maelström" and "Dream-Land". In "A Descent into the Maelström", Poe writes:

"Here the vast bed of waters, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting channels, burst suddenly into phrensiad convulsion—heaving, boiling, hissing—gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes except in precipitous descents" (Poe, "Descent", 85).

This vivid depiction of the whirlpool presents nature as overwhelming, uncontrollable, and indifferent to human life, exemplifying the central tenets of ecohorror. When analyzed through an ecocritical lens, Poe's portrayal reflects genuine concern about the natural world's ability to terrorize and destroy, highlighting the existential vulnerability of humanity<sup>3</sup>. If Gothic literature can be defined as a study of excess, then eco-Gothic applies this principle to ecological extremes, emphasizing the dark and fearsome aspects of the natural world. We can also see this in his work on "Dream-land":

"Seas that restlessly aspire,  
Surging, unto skies of fire;  
Lakes that endlessly outspread  
Their lone waters—lone and dead—  
Their still waters—still and chilly  
With the snows of the lolling lily."  
— *Dream-Land*, Edgar Allan Poe, 344

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<sup>3</sup> Rida Aulia Yasmin writes in her essay “The Excess of Gothic in Edgar Allan Poe’s Short Stories” how excess in gothic literature refers to the exaggeration. She uses the initial term introduced by Fred Botting to explain how, in gothic literature, certain features are frequently appeared through excess, such as deaths and madness. This is used as a form to engage readers in something that is negatively construed.

As we advance through our specific research, we will also concentrate on marine or maritime gothic and how it applies to Poe. When reading through some of his works, such as “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” the relationship between humans and their environment in the ocean, as well as the central fears and concerns raised by his gothic narrative, provide a geopolitical context to his work, which is liable to be read through the lens both of the maritime gothic and of ecohorror studies.

Ecohorror, in general, can also be seen as a critique of the idealization of the pastoral, offering instead visions of ecological collapse and retaliation. Moreover, we might argue that Poe’s writings similarly disrupt romanticized notions of nature as a benign or restorative force. His portrayals of the natural world, particularly water and landscapes, frequently emphasize instability, terror, and the lack of boundaries between human and nonhuman. In Poe’s work, nature is not a distant or a passive backdrop, it is instead a dynamic character which hostile force often resists human control.

Poe’s writing, then, becomes a vehicle for reorienting traditional pastoral ideals toward a more Gothic, yet realistic ecological awareness. His stories reflect a growing unease with the anthropocentric worldview and instead invite readers to consider a darker symbiosis, one in which nature is not merely scenic or sublime, but powerful, unpredictable, and morally indifferent. In portraying this uneasy relationship, Poe anticipates contemporary concerns about climate change and ecological collapse. By incorporating darker thematic elements into the human experience with nature, his work not only critiques the dominant cultural fantasies of control and harmony but also insists on the importance of place, the unsettling agency of nature, and the magnitude of human impact within ecological systems. In this way, Poe’s Gothic vision functions as an early expression of ecohorror’s central insight: that true coexistence with the natural world requires reckoning with its terror, its complexity, and our own complicity in its transformation.

## **Chapter 2: Ecological and Societal Anxieties in 18th–19th Century Maritime Gothic Literature**

As we have seen, ecocriticism provides a lens through which literature and historical narratives can be examined in relation to the natural world. By focusing on how human societies react and respond to ecological forces, we can also understand how these societies are shaped by environmental conditions. Applying this perspective to historical climate events and studying literature and historical records together through an ecocritical lens, we are able to understand how climatic stressors impacted societies and, consequently, the literature of the time. Since the focus of this research is on Edgar Allan Poe, a brief understanding of the environmental stressors of his era is crucial for our analysis.

The Industrial Revolution, which began in the 18th century, marked a period of rapid industrialization and economic growth, but it also dramatically intensified environmental degradation. The widespread use of fossil fuels for energy production released large quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, while industrial processes generated chemical pollutants that contaminated rivers and waterways. As Harold Fromm writes in *The Ecocriticism Reader*:

“By the eighteenth century, the rise of industrialism in the West was accompanied by a decline of religion that cannot be seen as an accidental concurrence. And from then on, the trend accelerates. As the average man becomes more enabled to live in comfortable houses that resist the elements, to escape most of the childhood diseases that had made fecundity a virtue, to preserve his teeth into middle or old age, to store food for weeks, months, or years ahead, to communicate rapidly through time and space, to move long distances with ease, to dispose of his excrements through indoor plumbing that makes them all magically vanish in a trice, his perception of Nature undergoes a startling alteration” (Fromm, 31).

At the same time, rising prosperity contributed to significant population growth, further amplifying pressure on natural resources. The development on technological advances was exceptionally positive towards the fields of transportation, both inland and in water. This phenomenon is often correlated with the production of coal and

steam engines. However, the environmental consequences of these developments persist today, fueling contemporary concerns about sustainability, though awareness of such impacts was not widespread at the time. Simon Estok highlights in his work “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia”:

“Not far behind the crossing of the seas and the colonialism that developed forthwith was, of course, the Industrial Revolution. Here, the control of nature was consolidated. Among the many paradigmatic shifts and lurches occasioned by the Industrial Revolution was the redefinition of nature from participative subject and organism in an organic community to the status of pure object, a machine that ideally could be intimately and infinitely controlled and forced to spit out products in the service of an increasingly utilitarian capitalist economy” (Estok, 9)

Even during the pre-industrial period, historical climatic variability had profound impacts on human societies. The Little Ice Age, for example, which happened roughly from the 16th to 19th centuries, brought unusually cold winters and unpredictable summers, which frequently disrupted agriculture across Europe, China, and Russia. For example, during the 1680s, harsh winters combined with intermittent hot summers caused widespread crop failures, famine, and social upheaval. While it is difficult to establish a complete cause-and-effect relationship between social and environmental issues, it is not impossible. Andersson’s research highlights how strong cooling waves significantly reduced food production, leading to shortages and famines: “From the mid-16th century, at the onset of strong climatic cooling, frequent and severe famines reappeared across the continent following decades of strong population growth, decreasing living standards, and increasing inequality. Severe famines occurred in 1556–1557, 1571–1572, 1586–1587, and during most of the 1590s” (Andersson, 5).

Understanding these changing aspects is crucial, as climate change significantly alters landscapes by raising global temperatures, triggering droughts, and disrupting atmospheric and environmental systems. These changes have profound effects not only on ecosystems but also on human mental health and well-being. The term *eco-anxiety* has emerged to describe a range of emotional responses—such as fear, anger,

exhaustion, helplessness, grief, and despair—provoked by the escalating climate crisis. While the term may be new, such emotional responses are not. As Estok argues on “Theorizing In A Space of Ambivalent Openness”, “Our continued failure to deal either theoretically or practically with the activist challenges of ecocriticism bode well neither for the field nor for the environment. We labor under the delusion that theory is incompatible with praxis, that theory cannot lead to changes in public policy, that theory is no good for the ‘real world’” (Estok, 4). His point underlines the urgent need to bridge theoretical inquiry with practical action in order to address both environmental degradation and its psychological impacts.

If we examine Edgar Allan Poe’s works through an ecocritical lens and consider the social and ecological concerns of his time, we can interpret some of his use of water symbolism as reflecting climatic and environmental issues already at play at the time of his writing. While we cannot say this with absolute certainty, in several of Poe’s stories, the correlation between his maritime narratives and the broader maritime developments of the Industrial Revolution appears significant. As we will see in further analysis, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* serves as a compelling example of the fear and uncertainty experienced by individuals aboard ships confronted with constant environmental change. We may also draw a link between anxiety and the historical moment by connecting his use of fear to elicit an emotional reaction from the reader and the year 1838, when the tale was written. Charles Wilkes endorsed the United States Exploring Expedition, which took place between 1838 and 1842.

This is why Eco gothic is such an important aspect for this research, it addresses society's growing ecological concerns that are based on a time period by concentrating on the connection with nature and the repercussions of environmental neglect, exploitation, and arrogance. Eco gothic storylines express anxieties about climate change, pollution, habitat destruction, and nature's unexpected reactions to human expansion. Pollution, climate change, and environmental toxicity are frequently expressed in ecohorror as changed or poisoned landscapes, animals, or plants. Toxic habitats are potent symbols of ecological imbalance, demonstrating the repercussions of human irresponsibility. Edgar Allan’s use of horror could have, among others, the effect of raising awareness of these fears, which, when analyzed both through literary studies and anthropogenic concerns, can create greater environmental responsibility. While

considering the role fear plays in ecohorror, and the concept of blue ecocriticism, it is easy to imagine how Poe might play a big role in this ecocritical discussion.

Building on nature's mightier, unbeknownst and darker aspects, maritime literature more broadly offers a rich site for ecocritical analysis, especially in its portrayal of human relationships with the ocean. Maritime literature provides a valuable field for ecocritical study, as it often examines the interactions between humans and the oceanic environment. The early European global maritime trade networks laid the foundation for water-based commerce, while also inspiring a genre of shipwreck stories that reflected the prevailing anxieties of the period. According to Steve Mentz in *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization*:

“The poetics of shipwreck thus uses its two distinctive modes, the wet and the dry, to represent the subjective experience of historical change. Wet narratives emphasize disorder, disorientation, and rupture; they narrate experiences in which the usual ways of doing things get broken or fragmented. In these moments all forms and fancies of human order dissolve. But narrative cannot bear absolute immersion for long, and nearly all shipwreck stories also contain a dry countermovement that attempts to make sense and meaning out of disaster.” (Mentz, 11)

Maritime Gothic literature frequently portrays the sea as an environment of isolation, haunting, and existential dread—where the boundaries between human and nonhuman, life and death. Alder observes in “Through Oceans Darkly: Sea Literature and the Nautical Gothic” that “the sea is a 'repository of the past'. Being a field on which our human politics and struggles are so often enacted, it holds shipwrecks, bodies, bones, and secrets that make it a vessel of history” (Alder, 1). Oceanic literature takes to task the ocean: not as a mere backdrop, but as a living, almost sentient force, encapsulating broader ecological anxieties about humanity's complex and often fraught relationship with the natural world.

Before proceeding further with the maritime gothic, it is useful to note a distinction between European and American Gothic traditions.

European Gothic, which began in the late 18th century with authors like as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, frequently stresses ghostly landscapes, aristocratic decay, and the conflict between reason and superstition, mirroring European social hierarchies and political instability (Punter 22). In contrast, American Gothic, as exemplified by writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, emphasizes psychological complexity, isolation, and the conflict between civilization and the wild natural world, frequently criticizing the moral and environmental consequences of American expansion and industrialization (Botting, *American Gothic*, 2004). This distinction emphasizes the Gothic's versatility, demonstrating how its themes and tactics may respond to many cultural settings while staying sensitive to Anthropocene worries. American Gothic's reliance on the expanse of the territory also entailed, at least in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a turn to the adventurous seascape.

This conceptual framework sets the stage for examining Poe's maritime narratives, where the Gothic representation of the sea becomes a vehicle for exploring human vulnerability and ecological anxieties. Building upon the Gothic representation of the sea, ecocritical frameworks offer insightful perspectives for interpreting the ocean as a potent symbol of ecological concern. Timothy Morton's notion of "hyper objects"—large-scale phenomena like climate change that exist across vast temporal and spatial dimensions—helps to conceptualize the ocean as an overwhelming and elusive force that defies complete human understanding (Morton, 1–10). In a related strain, Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence" draws attention to the gradual and often imperceptible nature of environmental harm, such as chemical contamination or ocean acidification, which tends to evade immediate detection yet results in significant long-term damage (Nixon 2–7). Together, these theoretical approaches shed light on how the deep, foreboding oceanic imagery in Maritime Gothic literature reflects and engages with larger environmental crises, highlighting human limitations in recognizing and mitigating the full consequences of ecological disruption.

As in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe also emphasized emotional effect as the primary goal of art, particularly of beauty and intensity, in his later essay "The Poetic Principle". While beauty and horror may seem like distinct emotions, Poe argued that the melancholy of terror is a power emotional tone in poetry and, when used properly, creates a deeper connection with the reader. By deliberately creating sinister

impressions, Poe draws attention to fears common to humanity, turning anxiety into a creative force and prompting reflection. In this way, horror can enlighten awareness to human fear, similar how ecocriticism examines our emotional response to environmental crises. Although Poe states that writing poetry without an overt moral lesson is “the highest form of poetic dignity”, we may argue that through his work of emotional effect he moved the reader into more important moral instructions.

Poe’s emphasis on horror as a tool for eliciting profound emotional responses naturally extends to his treatment of the sea in his Maritime Gothic works. Just as terror in poetry engages readers with universal fears, the ocean in his narratives functions as a similarly overwhelming and sublime force—mysterious, uncontrollable, and capable of inspiring both awe and dread. By framing the sea as an unpredictable and often threatening environment, Poe translates the psychological impact of horror into a spatial and natural context. This allows the reader to confront not only existential anxieties but also the broader implications of humanity’s vulnerability to natural forces. Consequently, the maritime setting becomes a canvas on which ecological fears, human ambition, and the sublime intersect, making Poe’s seascapes emblematic of both Gothic terror and early environmental awareness.

While shipwrecks and ghost ships are now commonly associated with horror narratives, the depiction of the sea as a mysterious and threatening force continues to resonate with current ecological issues. Present-day concerns, such as rising sea levels caused by climate change and the persistent problem of plastic pollution, highlight the ocean’s ongoing power and unpredictability. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the rapid industrialization and the growth of global maritime trade brought about nascent ecological anxieties that are reflected in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Stories like *A Descent into the Maelström* and “MS. Found in a Bottle”, which will be examined further in this study, portray the sea as both sublime and terrifying, serving as a metaphor for contemporary fears regarding nature’s uncontrollable forces.

Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant’s *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* discusses the sea as a multifaced symbol, representing the unknown, danger, and forces beyond human control, “L’eau est le symbole des énergies inconscientes, des puissances informes de l’âme, de tout ce qui est encore indifférencié, du principe féminin par excellence.” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*, p. 381). Here,

Chevalier and Gheerbrant talk about water being an universal symbol of life, of the subconscious, and of debatable a feminine identity. It has the duality of being a strong force of life as well as having the power for death. It is an element of transformation and purification, and they associate the ocean with a cosmic unknown place in the Earth. This symbolic understanding of water as both life-giving and destructive, familiar yet mysterious, offers a compelling lens through which to view Edgar Allan Poe's Maritime Gothic. In Poe's Maritime Gothic narratives, this symbolic resonance amplifies the emotional and psychological impact of his horror, aligning with his theory in *The Poetic Principle* that literature should evoke profound emotional effects. By framing the ocean as a sublime and threatening force, Poe's works reflect both human vulnerability and broader ecological anxieties. As we will see later in a deeper analysis, Poe's narrative "A Descent into the Maelstrom" or even "MS. Found in a Bottle", use maritime setting not only to create horror but evoke emotional waves, or once again, effects. By combining the symbolic interpretation with ecocritical and gothic frameworks, the ocean becomes a symbol of our anxieties about environmental uncertainty.

After examining the role of maritime Gothic in Poe's works, it becomes essential to understand why this focus matters for this present study. Central to this focus is the role of fear, which reflects characters' psychological states while shaping how readers experience and interpret the narrative. Fear not only exposes human vulnerability but also prompts reflection on human limitations. In the maritime Gothic, this emotional mechanism extends to environmental anxieties, compelling readers to confront the unpredictable and overwhelming power of nature. As we have seen, fear functions as a tool to reveal human vulnerability and to prompt reflection on our limitations. If we parallel this role of fear with the social and ecological anxieties present when these stories were written, the texts can be read as case studies of the broader concerns and tensions shaping nineteenth-century society. When applied to maritime Gothic literature, this emotional mechanism extends to environmental anxieties, allowing readers to confront the unpredictable and often overwhelming power of nature. Specifically, the fear of water in Poe's narratives goes beyond a simple apprehension of the ocean's force; it can also be interpreted as a manifestation of broader ecological concerns, such as the threat of tsunamis, flooding, earthquakes, and other environmental disruptions that arise from the destabilization of natural systems. By linking the Gothic

representation of water with these environmental fears, Poe's work anticipates contemporary anxieties about ecological collapse and highlights the enduring relevance of literature in shaping our understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

In this case, the fear of water extends beyond death and drowning to encompass a profound sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming consequences. It becomes a fear of uncertainty—of not knowing where the future leads or whether humanity has any agency in shaping it. Water both sustains and destroys: being deprived of it is as terrifying as being overpowered by it. Through its exploration of isolation, uncertainty, and ecological fragility, Maritime Gothic prompts a critical reevaluation of humanity's position within the natural world, highlighting the inherent limitations of human dominance and control. Closely aligned with ecocritical theory, the genre elucidates how environmental concerns—frequently grounded in historical ecological crises—are expressed and negotiated within cultural narratives.

### Chapter 3: Currents and Catastrophes: Water Symbolism in Poe's "Dream-Land", "The City in the Sea", and "Annabel Lee"

The growth of ecocriticism as a critical approach to the study of literature can be closely linked to the increasing urgency of addressing global ecological crises, which have become far more visible and pressing in recent decades. This theoretical development reflects a broader cultural perception that literature does not exist in isolation from environmental concerns, but rather engages with the ways humans perceive, interact with, and impact the natural world. In this context, the study of literature through an ecocritical lens enables a deeper understanding of how narratives respond to, interpret, and even anticipate environmental anxieties. This need to highlight the complex dynamics between human and nonhuman forces can be observed in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly in his stories and poems written between the 1830s and 1840s. This chapter will focus on Poe's poetry, namely poems that can be considered "maritime": "Dream-Land" (a poem published and changed from 1846 to 1849), "The City in the Sea" (1845)<sup>4</sup>, and "Annabel Lee". The methodology used to investigate this, that shall be used will respect some of the questions and aspects Glotfelty raise:

How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? (Glotfelty, 1996, p XIX)

All of Poe's works selected for this study prominently feature nature, with the specific element of water, which is central to this dissertation, playing a pivotal role both within the narrative and in shaping the experiences of the characters. The merging of Gothic and maritime techniques in Poe's writings allows for a nuanced exploration of ecophobia, a concept defined by Estok as "an irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world" (Estok, 208). Through the depiction of water as a powerful, unpredictable, and sometimes malevolent element, Poe's texts expose the psychological

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<sup>4</sup> An earlier version, "The Doomed City," was published in *Poems*, 1831.

and cultural dimensions of ecophobia, highlighting the ways human anxiety toward nature can manifest in fear, hostility, or avoidance. In this sense, Poe's maritime Gothic potentially dramatizes the human tendency to underestimate, control, or antagonize the natural world, particularly its aquatic domains.

"Dream-Land" differs from many of Poe's other poems in that the natural environment presented can be comprehended to be a utopian dream and its horrors not as evident. Poe's use of figurative language in his poems is common, including in "Dream-Land", written in 1844, is rich in figurative language and , which unfolds, as the title indicates, as the poet finds himself in a dream-like world. When you think of dreams, two things generally spring to mind: a beautifully positive dream or a gloomy and lonely nightmare. This is something we might relate to the above mentioned essay "The Philosophy of Composition", where he highlights the importance of Beauty in his poems "I should be carried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted, and which, with the poetical, stands not in the slightest need of demonstration — the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem" (Poe, Essay 16)). Nevertheless, Poe employs a variety of literary devices, including imagery, symbolism, and figurative language, to draw the reader into this twisted dream. Beauty and terror being constants with one another throughout his poem, leaving an effective impression on the reader.

In the volume *Poems*, for the edition of *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, T.O. Mabbott describes the poem in these terms: "It seems to me to be founded on experience, and it is exactly what its title suggests, a description of the world of dreams" (Mabbott in Poe, *Poems*, 342). This emphasis on dreams and distorted landscapes provides a useful entry point for ecocritical reading, as the poem's imagery often blurs the boundaries between psychological states and natural environments. Because ecocriticism is concerned with the link between literature and the environment, the following analysis will concentrate on how the poet employed and represented water and the implications such viewpoints may have on a reader's understanding of climate concerns. By analyzing how Poe represents water as both as a source of wonder and as a subtle, underlying force of unease, we can consider the broader implications for readers' understanding of ecological concerns, including the power, unpredictability, and moral indifference of the natural world. In this way, "Dream-Land" not only showcases

Poe's mastery of Gothic and Romantic techniques but also anticipates themes central to environmental consciousness.

Within the first stanza, Poe sets the scenery of this dream as something sublime "out of SPACE-out of time" (Poe, line 8). Besides the initial perception of the narrator, it is possible to see that the route to this land dark and solitary, and "an Eidolon", which is another word for phantom or ghost, named NIGHT sits on a black throne, rules over the darkness, which is a striking way to give agency to a time of day.

By a route obscure and lonely,  
Haunted by ill angels only,  
Where an Eidolon, named Night,  
On a black throne reigns upright,  
I have reached these lands but newly  
From an ultimate dim Thule —  
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,  
Out of Space — out of Time. (lines 1-8)

At first glance, this land appears as an alien, otherworldly realm, a dream suspended beyond physical existence. Yet Poe subtly anchors the poem in real geography by using terms such as "Thule," which in ancient Greek and Latin refers to a distant island or region, often identified with Iceland or Norway.<sup>5</sup> Although this reference may go unnoticed on a first reading, it is significant for a deeper analysis of the poem, as it situates the dreamlike imagery near the arctic circle, within a tangible, navigable space and reinforces the tension between imagination and reality. Additionally, Poe's use of figurative language emphasizes the centrality of water in this landscape. Through detailed and evocative descriptions of rivers, swamps, and marshes, the poem conveys water not merely as a physical feature but as a symbol of uncertainty, transformation, and the interconnection between human and nonhuman environments. This duality of

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<sup>5</sup> Mabbott speaks of this in his notes "Thulé was the Greek name for an island north of Britain. Its stock epithet is from Vergil, *Georgics*, I, 30, 'ultima Thule.' Poe's use is purely figurative here and in 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (page 346)

literal and symbolic representation highlights the poem's ecological and Gothic dimensions, inviting readers to explore the layered meanings of the natural world.

Bottomless vales and boundless floods,  
And chasms, and caves, and Titan woods,  
With forms that no man can discover  
For the dews that drip all over;  
Mountains toppling evermore  
Into seas without a shore;  
Seas that restlessly aspire,  
Surging, unto skies of fire (Poe, lines 8 – 16)

Boundless floods, a land that cries, restless seas without shores, lakes with lonely and dead waters, still and cold covered in snow. The discovery of the narrator of this dream-land is covered in fear and is associated with his perception of the water. Waters that are restless, lonely and yet still dead. Yet, they aspire, hope and wish for more. Throughout the poem, the continued emphasis in the water in this dream-land sets the direction that makes the mood dark, intense and depressed. The sea seems to be rising into a heated skies, while the water in the lakes stays stagnant and is described with an emotional charge of melancholy sounds “their sad waters, sad and chilly / with the snow of lolling lily [...] murmuring lowly, murmuring ever” (Poe, lines 23-26).

The description of such a natural environment has a recognizable gothic ambience. At the end, this gothic aspect of the dream-land is further set to seem like a nightmare of reality and Poe writes, “by each spot the most unholy—in each nook most melancholy—there the traveller meets aghast sheeted memories of the past—shrouded forms that start and sigh as they pass the wanderer by” (Poe, lines 31–36). Such painful recollections from the past may represent death as the narrator progresses through life. In this poem, the water hides the darkness and reality of this dream-land under the surface. A natural projection of our views about the ocean is that of a chaotic environment, one that has yet to be completely explored and can kill anyone who enters it without thinking. As humanity has explored the ocean throughout history, many

travelers have wondered and never returned, losing themselves, as well as their worries and memories, within it. The ocean often functions in literature as a kind of submerged cemetery, concealing death just beneath its surface. This imagery will be vividly echoed in T.S. Eliot's portrayal of Phlebas the Phoenician in "The Waste Land" (1922), where the sailor's life is claimed by the sea and forgotten: "A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers" (Eliot, lines 315–316). The fate of Phlebas underscores the sea's dual role as both a site of physical danger and a symbolic realm of transition, resonating with Greek mythological traditions in which the ocean often mediates between life and death. From Odysseus navigating perilous waters to the drowning of Narcissus, these narratives suggest that the sea is a liminal space where mortality, memory, and transformation converge. In *The Odyssey*, Tiresias prophesies that Odysseus will meet "gentle, painless death, far from the sea... in ripe old age, with all his people there in blessed peace around him" (Homer, Book 11, lines 136–157). This prophecy underscores the sea's role as both a realm of peril and a symbol of life's transience. In both Poe and Eliot, water emerges as a Gothic and mythopoetic symbol, representing not only loss and oblivion but also the impermanence and unpredictability of human life.

The swamp serves as another backdrop in the poem to support this viewpoint. As Erin Forbes states in his essay "Edgar Allan Poe and the Great Dismal Swamp", this swamp aesthetic may be interpreted as the "melding of a place and person, human and nonhuman, land and water" (Forbes, 370). Forbes further explains this liminal space, entangling it with the racial politics of antebellum America (recall Nat Turner's 1831 revolt, involving a plan to march to the Swamp): "The surface terrain of the swamp is viscous, fecund, and ungovernable, and the deeper social history of the swamp is equally generative. Thus, it is in the swamp that Poe is able to align the bereaved lover and the marooned slave as two figures for creative genius. This wetland geography generates the connections, mediations and repetitions across time and space, "the transported presence of places into other ones" that characterize Poe's aesthetics" (Forbes, 371). Poe, having been raised in Virginia, may have been familiar with one or more of the state's approximately 300 marshes throughout the Coastal Plain.<sup>6</sup> Such instances, where

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<sup>6</sup> Although Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, he lived with his adoptive family in Richmond, and entered the University of Virginia on February 14, 1826 – see chapter 5 of Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe: a Critical Biography*.

what seems like ambient location might carry geographical historicity, will recur in other works analyzed later. Such specificity gives grounding to the story but also gives us room to further analyze his the ecocritical potential of Poe's texts.

Whether intentionally or not, the poem's depiction of the swamp may evoke the Great Dismal Swamp in southern Virginia, historically known as a route that escaped enslaved people used on their way to freedom. In this context, the swamp functions not only as a Gothic and ecological setting but also as a site of cultural memory, linking natural and human histories and highlighting the inseparable entanglement of environment, society, and creativity. With this historical and geographical understanding, the following lines that describe the swamp take a much darker and realistic nightmare to this supposed Dream-Land:

By the dismal tarns and pools  
Where dwell the Ghouls,-  
By each spot the most unholy-  
In each nook most melancholy-  
There the traveller meets aghast  
Sheeted memories of the past-  
Shrouded forms that start and sigh  
As they pass the wanderer by (Poe, lines 29-36).

The stagnancy and darkness of the water evoke decay and loss, reinforcing the Gothic undertones of danger and unease. Yet, despite having traversed these ominous waters, the narrator exhibits a striking, almost unconscious blindness to the swamp's true character. Even in the fourth stanza, he continues to describe the land as a peaceful, utopian place, revealing a dissonance between perception and reality. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between human desire for harmony and the persistent, indifferent presence of the natural world. It also reflects a broader ecocritical insight: human interpretations of nature are often filtered through emotion, nostalgia, or wishful thinking, obscuring the ecological and historical realities that underlie the landscape.

Tis a peaceful, soothing region-

For the spirit that walks in shadow  
'Tis-oh, 'tis an Eldorado!  
But the traveller, travelling through it  
May not-dare not openly view it;  
Never its mysteries are exposed  
To the weak human eye unclosed; (Poe, lines 40-46)

Although the poem concludes with the narrator speaking favorably of the “Dream-Land”, it is possible to discern an underlying nightmarish quality in this imagined world and the inevitable disharmony that suggests it may not be a dream at all. The tension between the fantastical surface and the lurking dread evokes a discursive short-circuit, highlighting the fragile boundary between imagination and reality. The pain and anxiety conveyed through the speaker’s despair resonate with the reader, whose own perception is limited, mirroring a blindness to the darker forces at work in the world. This chaotic, unstable landscape can be read as an allegory for the human relationship with nature, reflecting broader patterns of exploitation, misunderstanding, and ecological imbalance. In this way, the poem invites readers not only to experience the emotional intensity of Gothic terror but also to consider the ethical and existential implications of human interactions with the nonhuman environment.

By a route obscure and lonely,  
Haunted by ill angels only,  
Where an Eidolon, named Night,  
On a black throne reigns upright,  
I have reached these lands but newly  
From an ultimate dim Thule —  
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,  
Out of Space — out of Time. (Poe, lines 1-8, 344).

This passage reflects the eerie and unsettling atmosphere that lies beneath the poem’s seemingly fantastical landscape. The “route obscure and lonely” conveys not only the nightmarish Gothic undertones of the text but also a sense of psychological

unease, suggesting isolation, disorientation, and even entrapment within the dreamscape. By combining the language of wonder with imagery of darkness and desolation, Poe creates a space that is at once enchanting and threatening. In this way, “Dream-Land” embodies the duality of dreams as both alluring and terrifying, while also giving voice to deeper anxieties, whether existential, ecological, or social, that lurk beneath the surface of the imagination.

If “Dream-Land” immerses the reader in a surreal and disorienting dreamscape, “The City in the Sea” advances Poe’s Gothic vision in a different register, where archaic language and imagery heighten the poem’s otherworldly atmosphere. The archaic language, which consists of words, expressions, grammar, or syntax that were once in regular use but have fallen out of modern usage, is much more present in “The City in The Sea”. Bearing in mind that its first version in 1831 was called “The Doomed City,” the presence of Death as a personified character acquires a looming importance: it has created itself a throne, strange, dim, and surrounded by “melancholy waters” (Poe, line 13)<sup>7</sup>. In this city, light comes from the lurid sea and not the sky, bright but unpleasant. Right at the beginning, Poe sets a very different relation between Water and the city where Death resides. Although Death is the focus of the first stanza, Water becomes a very important character in this narrative poem as well. The connection between Death and the water is stated from the beginning, weather to state how similar they are, or to show their difference. The duality of life and death, water and death can be seen in different lines of the poem where Poe emphasizes the melancholy pain in which the water lies, its sadness and unpleasantness is evident from the first stanza of the poem, although it is only the third stanza that the reason why becomes obvious.

There open fanes and gaping graves  
Yawn level with the luminous waves;  
But not the riches there that lie  
In each idol’s diamond eye-  
Not the gaily-jewelled dead  
Tempt the waters from their bed;

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<sup>7</sup> The version used is the 1969 volume 1 of “The collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe” edited by T.O. Mabbott.

For no ripples curl, alas! (Poe, lines 30 – 36)

The ambiguity surrounding the “riches that lie” beneath the water is particularly compelling, as the speaker offers no clarification regarding the nature of these riches. It is possible that he himself remains uncertain, merely presuming their monetary value. However, given the thematic emphasis on death within the stanza, one might interpret these riches as valuable only in the context of death and the ocean itself. Riches beneath the water could suggest treasure lost through maritime exploration. This perspective suggests the presence of shipwrecks concealed beneath the surface, potentially filled not only with gold but also with human remains. Seemingly endowed with agency, the water has accepted the unpleasantness of all that lies in its bed, “riches and gaily jeweled dead” (Poe, line 34). Such emphasis on the riches and the dead that lie beneath the water establishes a strong link to all the history and pain of sea exploration that lurks beneath calm waters. As the dead lie cheerfully in the sea, trying to tempt the water from its stillness, they are oblivious to the decline and of the red-stained sea. However, if the water is imagined as belonging to Death, then these riches become Death’s own treasures, casting the image in a far more somber light. In both aspects, the historical and the symbolic, the geographical and cultural connotations of this imagery resonate with broader narratives of maritime exploration and its costs.

In Poe’s work, the natural or nonhuman environment often serves as a powerful force that erases individual identity, both physically and spiritually. As Matthew A. Taylor observes, Poe “repeatedly makes the nonhuman environment the field against which discrete selves disappear—both as material bodies and as metaphysical entities” (Taylor 364). This dissolution of the self may seem abstract at first, but it resonates with broader ecological and societal implications. By staging human fragility against overwhelming natural forces, Poe not only dramatizes existential anxieties but also anticipates ecological perspectives that recognize the human as deeply vulnerable to, and enmeshed within, nonhuman systems. In this sense, his Gothic environments serve as imaginative case studies of environmental precarity, reflecting both the cultural anxieties of his own era and the enduring tension between human agency and the indifferent power of the natural world. This can be seen in when Poe writes “And when, amid no earthly moans / Down, down that town shall settle hence” (Poe, lines 53-54). The sea

emerges as an overwhelming force, untouched by earthly influence, while the image of “thousand thrones” evokes both the weight of history and the sheer power of natural forces that dwarf human agency.

Poe’s choice of language and imagery in the poem can also be interpreted as a representation of the ocean’s suffering under human interference. In the fourth stanza, “no swellings tell that winds may be / Upon the far-off happier sea” (Poe, lines 38–39), the “swelling” of the wind—suggestive of an abnormal bodily enlargement caused by injury—seems to have no effect on the mechanical stillness of the water. Although Poe introduces the adjective “happy” to describe the sea, he ventures that such happiness belongs to some remote, perhaps otherworldly water realm. Also, this happiness is paradoxically linked to lack of movement, which can also be read as a lack of life. If stillness implies happiness, then by contrast, movement must suggest unhappiness or sadness.

This interpretation shifts in the final, fifth stanza, where the ocean is described in motion for the first time. At a surface level, the sea’s movement could symbolize vitality or renewal, but if motion represents sorrow, then the narrator’s fate is sealed as soon as the waters begin to rise. The narrator’s hope quickly dissipates as the sea swallows all that once stood above it. Yet, again paradoxically, this destruction seems to leave the ocean “happier” than before: its movement and reflected light suggest a restored vitality, and even the earth itself begins to communicate through “moans.” In this way, Poe’s imagery suggests that the ocean finds a kind of grim satisfaction—or release—once it overcomes the forces that sought to restrain it.

Not the gaily-jewell’d dead  
Tempt the waters from their bed:  
For no ripples curl, alas!  
Along that wilderness of glass —  
No swellings hint that winds may be  
Upon a far-off happier sea:  
So blend the turrets and shadows there  
That all seem pendulous in air,  
While from the high towers of the town

Death looks gigantically down. (Poe, 35-45)

In this instant, the speaker's response to the shift in his surroundings is the visible moment that might question the terrified human response to nature and the connectivity between humans and the natural world. The encounter dramatizes how fear, despair, or alienation emerges when humans are forced to acknowledge nature's otherness and its capacity to overwhelm human control or comprehension. Such a moment may be interpreted through Taylor's rationale in the following instance:

"Ecophobia is no more a response than ecophilia to the human self's assimilation into larger environmental networks. But it nevertheless can serve as a useful check on the ecophilic impulse toward self-universalization, and it can do so, contrary to Estok's assessment, without reestablishing the humanist boundaries that would separate us from the world" (Taylor, "The Nature of Fear", page 362).

In other words, the terror experienced in Poe's "The City In The Sea" can be seen, not as a regressive recoil from environment, but as a necessary reminder that human beings do not stand apart from nature. Instead, are implicated within it. The nightmarish elements of the poem dramatize this reminder, which forces the reader to confront his own fears. This relates back to the concept of effect on the reader, especially as discussed in "The Philosophy of Composition". Poe's unity of effect might arguably operate beyond individual psychology and into ecological awareness. Just as "The Raven" channels grief and longing into a singular emotional impression, "The City in the Sea" channels fear of ecological entanglement into an atmosphere of inevitability and doom. The stillness of the sea lulls both narrator and reader into a fragile sense of security, only to be undone by the sudden and overwhelming rise of the waters.

While "Dream-Land" reveals Poe's reluctance to blur the line between dream and nightmare in order to expose the instability of humanity's relationship with nature, "The City in the Sea" intensifies this vision by presenting an apocalyptic landscape where water and death converge in a haunting tableau of ruin. Here, the sea does not simply frame human experience but becomes a site of corruption, decay, and inevitability, amplifying the ecophobic dimensions of Poe's imagination. Let us conclude by analysing

“Annabel Lee,” one of Poe’s latest poems, of 1849, where the sea acquires a more intimate yet equally destructive force, occupying the center of grief and loss, as if the ocean itself conspired in human suffering. Taken together, these poems illustrate how Poe employs water as both a symbolic and material presence, one that unsettles, mourns, and terrifies, thereby underscoring the ecogothic tensions between beauty, terror, and ecological dread.

In “Annabel Lee,” Poe portrays the sea as a cold, looming, and emotionless force, reflecting ecophobic themes; however, the sea can also be interpreted as a refuge, a vast, enveloping space where the speaker’s love and memories endure beyond death. Published shortly after the poet’s death, “Annabel Lee” tells the story of two lovers whose love is so deep and pure that even the angels envy them, resulting in the young woman’s untimely death out of malice. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes that their kingdom is located by the sea, a detail that holds significant symbolic weight. This can be seen in the first four stanzas:

It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea, [...]  
*I* was a child and *she* was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea; [...]  
And this was the reason that, long ago,  
In this kingdom by the sea, [...]  
To shut her up in a sepulchre,  
In this kingdom by the sea. (Poe, lines 1-20)

The constant repetition of the sea setting may reflect its dual role as both a barrier and a refuge—while it represents the physical separation caused by Annabel Lee’s death, the sea also serves as a timeless, encompassing space where the narrator’s love persists beyond mortality. On one hand, it embodies the physical separation created by Annabel Lee’s death, a boundary that keeps the lovers apart. On the other, it serves as a timeless and encompassing space where the narrator’s devotion endures beyond mortality. In this sense, the sea symbolizes the vastness and persistence of love itself—limitless, eternal, and uncontainable.

This persistent reference underlines the enduring and comprehensive nature of the young lovers' bond, suggesting that love, like the sea, is vast, eternal, and uncontainable. Rather than a personified character, the sea in this poem seems to be more like a threshold symbol, between heaven and hell, or between heaven and the earthly realm – parting, but potentially also connecting, the human and the angelic. The divisive character of the natural elements sea and air (wind), is first noticed in the third stanza of the poem where Poe writes:

In this kingdom by the sea,  
A wind blew out of cloud, chilling  
My beautiful Annabel lee; (Poe, lines 14-16)

The sea's ominous and cold presence is a destabilizer for the beauty and purity that Annabel Lee represents to the narrator. According to Taylor, "The object of our fear, that is, becomes indistinguishable from ourselves, which is not to say that we become the world but rather that we become afraid of the shadows that we sense we are, scared as much by our inanimation as by the animation of the world" (Taylor, "The Nature of Fear", page 365). These words may be applied in "Annabel Lee", considering that the object of fear is a foreshadowing of the inevitability of the death that is to come. In this context, the sea functions as the boundary between the narrator's self and the vast, indifferent natural world. The sea itself becomes the object of fear, foreshadowing the inevitability of death that overshadows the narrator's devotion. This tension creates in the reader a sense of uneasiness, as the narrator's sweet declarations of love are shadowed by the sea's quiet essence. This interplay produces in the reader an unsettling sense of fear and anxiety, even as the narrator's words toward Annabel Lee remain full of sweetness and love.

Poe's deliberate use of language and tone is fundamental to the emotional resonance and thematic complexity of his poetry. The term "night-tide," while commonly understood as a poetic synonym for nighttime according to Merriam-Webster, also carries a more nuanced meaning, referring to the nocturnal ebb and flow of the sea during a flood tide. This dual significance enriches the sixth stanza of "Annabel Lee", imbuing the depiction of death and burial with layered symbolism. As the narrator sits

beside the sea, the rhythmic movement of the waters both physically and metaphorically envelops the body of his beloved, consigning her to the depths of the ocean. This imagery not only evokes the finality of death but also reflects the narrator's profound sense of loss and dread. In this sense, the sea becomes both a tomb and mourner, it seals Annabel Lee away while simultaneously echoing the narrator's grief in its ceaseless movement. Furthermore, the lamentation that closes the poem exemplifies the theme of ecophobia, as the sea itself is implicated in the demise of Annabel Lee, intertwining the natural environment with the forces of destruction and mourning.

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side Of  
my darling - my darling - my life and my bride, In  
the sepulcher there by the sea,  
In her tomb by the sounding sea. (Poe, lines 39-41)

What is most significant about the repetition of the mention of the sea in "Annabel Lee" is its constant connection to chaos and death throughout the story. At the start of the poem, the sea surrounds the kingdom as the narrator meets and falls in love with Annabel Lee. At the middle, when the angels descend from heaven, envious of the love they do not possess, it is the chilly sea that emphasizes the separation from the narrator as the angels take Annabel Lee. Finally, it is the sea that buries her after death, leaving the narrator to mourn in solitude. This narrative arc makes the sea not merely a setting but an active agent of division and loss, tying each stage of the love story to forces beyond human control. Aligning environmental ethics to such a romantic tale may be a difficult task; however, this narrative relates to the belief of ecocriticism on the interdependence of human and nonhuman. Poe approaches the relationship between human and the natural world in a subtle way, yet he draws attention to the fluidity of boundaries by underlining the constant repetition and presence of the sea in the story.

In conclusion, Poe's poetic and narrative treatment of water and the natural environment underscores the enduring relevance of Gothic literature to contemporary ecological thought. Across "Dream-Land", "The City in the Sea", and "Annabel Lee", water functions not merely as a backdrop, but as a dynamic force shaping human experience, memory, and mortality. Through the interplay of Gothic imagery, figurative language,

and the nonhuman environment, Poe both evokes ecophobic anxieties and invites reflection on humanity's fraught relationship with nature. His works reveal a complex tension: the allure and terror of the natural world, the fragility of human identity in the face of elemental forces, and the consequences of neglecting our ethical responsibilities toward the environment. In particular, Poe's visions of drowning, ruin, and environmental indifference resonate uncannily with contemporary concerns about rising seas, climate instability, and humanity's vulnerability to ecological collapse. By tracing these themes, this study demonstrates that Poe's Gothic imagination anticipates questions central to ecocriticism today, highlighting literature's power to illuminate the psychological, cultural, and ethical dimensions of ecological crises.

#### **Chapter 4: Into the Maelstrom: Water Symbolism in “MS. Found In A Bottle”, “A Descent into the Maelstrom” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket***

Different than Poe’s poems, where Water may seem to be a present yet secondary element in the narrative, in his short story “MS. Found in a Bottle”, written in 1833, the narrator finds himself in a series of misadventures at sea. Sea exploration in the 1800s was deeply influenced by the need to advance scientific knowledge on the ocean. This might have influenced Poe’s fascination with such theme, as he came to write various short stories about the topic, some of which it will be discussed in this research. In “MS. Found in a Bottle” the narrator boards a ship from Batavia, present day Indonesia, to sail away on a sea voyage only to later find himself and other seaman in many difficult survival situations. Poe’s recurring interest in the perils and mysteries of the sea is evident in his maritime tales, including the narrative that follows.<sup>8</sup>

Ecophobia, or specifically fear of water, is a prominent theme in this narrative. From the very beginning, the narrator regards water with a sense of horror even as he acknowledges its necessity for survival. Poe underscores this tension through deliberate tone and diction. His use of terms such as *aridity* (which, according to the Cambridge Dictionary means excessive dryness caused by a lack of water) highlights the paradoxical presence of absence: water is defined by its lack, and yet it dominates the narrator’s imagination. As seen in the line, “I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius” (118), the very choice of word signals both deprivation and dependence, reflecting how the narrator’s fear is entangled with a recognition of water’s essential role. In this way, Poe establishes from the outset the uneasy duality that shapes the narrative: water as both vital and terrifying, indispensable yet threatening. The choice of

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<sup>8</sup> Mabbott adds in his notes at the beginning of the chapter dedicated to the narrative in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* vol. 1, that Poe’s story engages with contemporary scientific and pseudo-scientific ideas “Poe’s story combines several themes. One is the notion of Captain John Cleves Symmes, who believed the earth was hollow, open at both of the poles, and capable of habitation within. With James McBride, Symmes published *Symmes’ Theory of Concentric Spheres* (Cincinnati, 1826). He had first propounded his ideas in 1818, and a story, *Symzonia*, by “Captain Adam Seaborn” (perhaps Symmes himself), appeared in 1820, and was reprinted in facsimile with an introduction by J. O. Bailey in 1965. Symmes’ monument in Hamilton, Ohio, with a figure of the pierced globe, is famous. The second theme is that of the Flying Dutchman, Sir Walter Scott says in a note to *Roqueby* (1813) II, xi, 25”. This also allows us to foreshadows some of the recurring themes of obsession with the unknown, danger to human curiosity, and the narrator’s fear of water and the sea.

word *reproach* also carries a certain similarity to *parched*, which represents the struggle with thirst. The narrator is therefore caught in a paradox, torn between his longing to explore the mystical infinitude of the sea and his failure to fully recognize the peril it harbors. This tension reflects Poe's broader preoccupation with nature as a force that is at once alluring and destructive, inviting human engagement even as it threatens annihilation.

After his departure, where he informs the reader of the beauty and strength of the ship, the narrator and the remaining crew quickly come across deceptive situations that initially caused no disharmony, but that soon spread to more dangerous conditions. The narrator recites the conditions which slowly led to the fury of the sea "my notice was soon afterwards attracted by the dusky-red appearance of the moon, and the peculiar character of the sea" (119). It is in this movement within the story that the reader begins to grasp both the significance and the threat posed by the sea. As the narrative unfolds, the narrator recounts in detail the overwhelming fury of the storm-tossed waters and his increasingly water-logged ship, culminating in his struggle beneath an immense tempest. This depiction emphasizes the sea's dual role as a site of awe and terror, highlighting the precarious balance between human ambition and nature's uncontrollable power.

By what miracle I escaped destruction, it is impossible to say. Stunned by the shock of the water, I found myself, upon recovery, jammed between the stern-post and rudder. [...] so terrific, beyond the wildest imagination, was the whirlpool of mountainous and foaming ocean within which we were engulfed. [...] All on deck, with the exception of ourselves, had been swept overboard; -- the captain and mates must have perished as they slept, for the cabins were deluged with water. [...] Our cable had, of course, parted like pack-thread, at the first breath of the hurricane [...]. We scudded with frightful velocity before the sea, and the water made clear breaches over us. (119-120)

Besides the obvious fear of the narrator of the ocean, specifically emphasized by Poe's use of words such as "heavily from the sea" and "engulfed", it is possible to notice that the impression the narrator had of the sea as a changing entity. As if it were a

mystical being, the narrator starts to refer to the sea with more respect, fear, and emotional characteristics. Furious and turgid, the “unfathomable ocean” rapidly takes control of the narrator’s life “bitterly into the world of ocean” (140), which translates that feeling of isolation and fear. In this way, Poe seems to emphasize the importance of environmental knowledge: the sea is more than a personified force, instead it becomes a transcendental character whose power and unpredictability demand recognition, reflection, and respect.

The detailed description of the ocean in this narrative holds immense importance to the focus of this discussion. As the narrator starts to lose hope for his survival, the portrayal of the ocean becomes darker and more gothic, “every knot of way the ship made, the swelling of the black stupendous sea became more dismally appalling” (121). Although the ocean is initially depicted as vast and incomprehensible force, as the narrator’s journey begins, the sea transforms into a “peculiar character” and the air around it becomes “intolerably hot”, setting a tone that the narrator and the reader are slipping into a different realm.

“My notice was soon afterwards attracted by the dusky-red appearance of the moon, and the peculiar character of the sea. The latter was undergoing a rapid change, and the water seemed more than usually transparent. Although I could distinctly see the bottom, yet, heaving the lead, I found the ship in fifteen fathoms. The air now became intolerably hot, and was loaded with spiral exhalations similar to those arising from heated iron. As night came on, every breath of wind died away, and a more entire calm it is impossible to conceive” (137).

As the narrative progresses, the sea’s malevolent nature becomes more apparent. The narrator recounts how the ship was overwhelmed by a massive wave, nearly being swept over, with only one crew surviving. The sea, which was once a source of livelihood, was transformed into an indifferent and destructive power.

Using the words of Jimmy Packham and David Punter their article, “Oceanic Studies and the Gothic Deep,” we may say these narratives “assert the prominence and preeminence of the uncanny nonhuman forms that inhabit the oceans’ depths while searching for a language in which such things and their oceanic domains might be

contained” (Packham and Punter, 3). Poe extends this concept through the narrator’s escalating terror leading him to ponder on “the slumbers of the kraken” in the deep (138), a legendary sea monster of immense proportions, as the ship nears a whirlpool near the South Pole. This episode underscores the ocean’s terrifying and unknowable power, emphasizing humanity’s smallness and fragility in the face of nature’s vast, mysterious forces. The kraken functions not merely as a creature but as a manifestation of the sea’s unpredictability, amplifying the narrative’s tension and reinforcing the narrator’s, and by extension, the reader’s sense of awe and fear.

Isolated and near death, the narrator encounters another ship colliding with his own; rather than offering reassurance, this event intensifies his fear. The sight of a much larger and sturdier vessel succumbing to the ocean’s overwhelming force underscores the sea’s uncontrollable power. Poe describes the scene: “I beheld a spectacle which froze the current of my blood. At a terrific height directly above us, and upon the very verge of the precipitous descent, hovered a gigantic ship of, perhaps, four thousand tons. [...] But what mainly inspired us with horror and astonishment, was that she bore up under a press of sail in the very teeth of a supernatural sea, and that of ungovernable hurricane” (121). This encounter marks a turning point in the narrator’s perception of his voyage; he later emphasizes that although his ship is “well armed, she is not, I think, a ship of war” (123). Thus, his relationship with the ocean shifts from one of adventurous exploration to one of confrontation and survival.

This moment offers a profound ecocritical insight, highlighting how the narrator’s fear of death and war is intrinsically linked to his growing terror of the natural environment—an environment he ultimately recognizes as uncontrollable and insurmountable. As Tidwell and Soles argue in their introduction to *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene*, “Ecohorror in the Anthropocene presents a vision of that terraformed planet as frightening rather than promising and reflects both the horrors we face now and those we fear will occur in the future” (Tidwell and Soles, 3). This perspective underscores the pervasive anxiety surrounding humanity’s fraught relationship with the environment, a theme vividly embodied by the confrontation with the overwhelming forces of the ocean that the narrator enacts in “Ms. Found in a Bottle.” This is precisely what transpires in the tale, since human marine exploration is typically

conducted with little regard for the ocean and the environment, as humans consider that it is their right to seize supremacy over.

After his harrowing encounter with the whirlpool, the narrator's attitude toward the ocean shifts markedly, evolving from fear to a profound respect for its overwhelming power. He reflects on his earlier fears with a sense of shame, recognizing their inadequacy in the face of nature's true force: "when I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions. If I trembled at the blast which has hitherto attended us, shall I not stand aghast at a warring of wind and ocean, to convey an idea of which the words tornado and simoom are trivial and ineffective? All in the immediate vicinity of the ship is the blackness of eternal night, and the chaos of foamless water" (125). This passage underscores the narrator's growing awareness of the ocean's immense and terrifying power, which far exceeds human comprehension and control.

When the narrator finds himself without hope for survival as the whirlpool finally takes control of the ship, he goes into a mix of terror and acceptance for his inevitable death :

Oh, horror upon horror! the ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance. But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny —the circles rapidly grow small —we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool —and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and —going down (125-126).

Such progression can be explained by what Taylor deems to be "Poe's conception of the assimilation of individual life into a larger field of being, the inevitable loss of one's person for an obliterative identity with the universe" (Taylor, "The Nature of Fear", page 64). Having examined the portrayal of the sea and the narrator's escalating ecophobia in "MS. Found in a Bottle", we can see how Poe uses maritime Gothic elements to explore human vulnerability in the face of overwhelming natural forces. This focus on the ocean as both a site of wonder and terror continues in *A Descent into the Maelström*, where

the narrative further intensifies the confrontation between human fragility and the raw power of the sea

Out of all of Poe's sea narratives, "A Descent into the Maelstrom" written in 1841, is the one that reveals the macabre nature of the ocean. In the article in the *Panorama Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*, a river is often thought as metaphor for time, ever changing, flowing into a single direction. The ocean, however, is anything but steady. In the opposite spectrum, the maelstrom, which gives Poe's narrative its title, refers to a system of powerful tidal whirlpools that the narrator must confront while sailing along the Norwegian coast. As we will come to see, beyond its geographic and physical reality, the maelstrom in Poe's story functions as a Gothic and ecophobic symbol, embodying the overwhelming and uncontrollable forces of nature. It externalizes human vulnerability, presenting the sea not merely as a setting but as a conscious, almost sentient antagonist whose immense power challenges both the narrator's survival and his sense of agency.

The epigraph that opens Poe's narrative immediately introduces an ecocritical question, compelling the reader to consider the relationship between humans and the overwhelming forces of nature. As we accompany the narrator through the perils of the maelstrom, we are invited to reflect on what it might truly mean to confront such an immense and uncontrollable natural phenomenon and survive to tell the tale. Glanville observes this tension, noting that "The ways of God in Nature, as in Providence, are not as our ways; nor are the models that we frame any way commensurate to the vastness, profundity, and unsearchableness of His works, which have a depth in them greater than the well of Democritus" (579). This statement underscores the limits of human understanding when faced with the immensity of natural forces, highlighting a central tenet of ecocriticism: that literature can illuminate our vulnerability and provoke reflection on humanity's place within the broader ecological world.

From the start, the narrator informs us that although he survived the journey through the Maelstrom, it left his body and mind broken. "You suppose me a very old man – but I am not / It took less than a single day to change these hairs from a jetty black to white, to weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves, so that I tremble at the least exertion, and am frightened at a shadow" (578). Poe's narrative evokes a sense of eco-terror not through supernatural or fantastical forces, but by grounding the reader's fear

in the tangible and formidable power of the ocean. This realism is reinforced by Poe's specific geographical reference to Helseggen (or Helseggen Mosken), an uninhabited island off the coast of Norway, near which lies the Moskstraumen—one of the most powerful whirlpools in the world that it is adjacent to the Moskstraumen, one of the most intense and dangerous tidal whirlpools on the planet. As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the "Mostenstraumen or Moskstraumen is a channel off the northwest coast of Norway with dangerous tidal currents" ..

The narrative highlights the necessity for an environmental perspective that moves beyond the simplistic personification of nature, urging instead a recognition of its complex, often indifferent agency. Throughout the text, Poe's detailed depiction of the geographical landscape plays a crucial role, immersing the reader in a part of the natural world that may seem remote or unfamiliar. The ocean is rendered with vivid intensity by the narrator, who portrays it as a volatile and unrelenting force, marked by violent swells and chaotic motion in every direction. This portrayal emphasizes the strangeness and power of the natural environment, challenging human attempts to fully understand or control it.

"Suddenly -- very suddenly -- this assumed a distinct and definite existence, in a circle of more than a mile in diameter. The edge of the whirl was represented by a broad belt of gleaming spray ; but no particle of this slipped into the mouth of the terrific funnel, whose interior, as far as the eye could fathom it, was a smooth, shining, and jet-black wall of water, inclined to the horizon at an angle of some forty-five degrees, speeding dizzily round and round with a swaying and sweltering motion, and sending forth to the winds an appalling voice, half shriek, half roar, such as not even the mighty cataract of Niagara ever lifts up in its agony to Heaven" (Poe, page 129)

The relationship between the narrator and the ocean grows in fear and respect as he encounters the Maelstrom. The transformative impact of the ocean on the narrator becomes evident early in the narrative, as his recounting of the encounter gradually shifts from a relatable human experience to one marked by awe, fear, and a profound sense of insignificance in the face of nature's power. "I became aware of a loud and

gradually increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffalos upon an American prairie; and at the same moment I perceived that what seamen term the chopping character of the ocean beneath us” (Poe, page 128). The impact becomes then something “no means prepared me for what I saw” (Poe, page 129). The narrator’s imagery also subtly gestures to colonial perspectives, as the comparison to the American prairie and the “herd of buffalos” evokes ideas of exploration, conquest, and the human attempt to categorize and dominate the natural world, highlighting the tension between human ambition and the uncontrollable forces of nature. While the effects that the encounter with the Maelstrom had on the narrator and the narratees can be accounted for as ripples by which “humanity, the microcosm, directly affects and is affected by the physical world, the macrocosm” (Bressler, page 235).

Poe’s choice of imagery and tone of words is significant: from “impetuous ebb” (Poe, page 130) to the use of “roar of the water” (582). These connotative phrases convey both movement and sound, immersing the reader in the physical and emotional turbulence of the narrator’s experience. The “impetuous ebb” suggests a restless, almost willful motion of the sea, while the “roar of the water” evokes overwhelming force and threat, amplifying the narrator’s sense of vulnerability. Together, these images not only depict the ocean’s dynamic power but also mirror the narrator’s escalating fear and awe, making the natural environment a central character in the story’s unfolding tension.

Along with such literary devices, emotion is crucial to eco-horror and Poe relates that through the typical narrative of men confronting a force of nature that is bigger and stronger than man and completely out of his control. The terror and fascination throughout his narration of the events is congruent with one of the goals of ecocriticism, as enunciated by Robert Kern in “Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?”: to enhance the realism of the link between man and nature.

“One object of ecocriticism, see it, is to read in such a way as to amplify the reality of the environment in or of a text, even if in doing so we resist the tendency of text itself (or of our own conditioning as readers) to relegate the environment to the status of setting, so that it becomes a place chiefly interesting

because of the human events that unfold in it, or to see its significance as primarily symbolic, so that it becomes something essentially other than itself.” (Kern, 11)

In “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” the symbolism of water, different from what we examined in previous work, carries a far more immediate and realistic sense of fascination and horror at the unknown vastness of the ocean. Here, water is not merely a Gothic or fantastical device; it embodies the unpredictable, untamable forces of nature that resist human comprehension. Historically, humanity has often reconstructed nature to fit ideals of the picturesque, reshaping landscapes and oceans in ways that satisfy aesthetic tastes while frequently causing environmental harm. In contrast, the narrator’s attempts to understand and anticipate the ocean’s movements fail repeatedly, reflecting both the limits of human knowledge and the historical realities of sea exploration. As Poe writes, “After making several guesses of this nature, and being deceived in all – this fact – the fact of my invariable miscalculation, set me upon a train of reflection that made my limbs again tremble, and my heart beat heavily once more” (592). This passage underscores the tension between human curiosity and human vulnerability: the ocean’s vastness is at once captivating and terrifying, revealing the psychological weight of ecophobia while simultaneously highlighting the ethical and existential consequences of underestimating the power of the natural world.

By demonstrating the power of the ocean in such a story, Poe ascribes an important role to the water in the development of the characters, even if it is in a negative way. Narratives such as these are ripe for ecocritical analysis so that we may consider our attitudes towards nature and ecological crisis. This is a notion that can be perceived the minute the narrator tells the reader, “If you have never been at sea in a heavy gale, you can form no idea of the confusion of mind occasioned by the wind and the spray together. They blind, deafen and strangle you, and take away all power of action or reflection” (589). Here, the ocean not only physically overpowers the narrator but also disrupts his cognition, emphasizing both the vulnerability of the individual and the uncontrollable force of the natural world.

In almost every narrative, the narrator must make a decision. Moments like this are the core of effective narrative, and Poe also employs this technique in his 1837 novel *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. This moment of decision is portrayed

throughout the story via the narrator's thoughts and accounts, but for the purposes of this discussion, one particularly useful lens is the concept of movement, literal and metaphorical, as a measure of decision-making. By examining how the narrator moves through space, faces physical and psychological challenges, and makes consequential choices, we can consider how Poe's depiction of character agency intersects with ecocritical concerns: the human attempt to navigate, survive, and make sense of environments that are vast, unpredictable, and morally indifferent.

In the story, Arthur Gordon Pym is forced to choose between two possibilities. Going up to his crew members and perhaps surviving, or going below and potentially dying. Initially, Pym informs the reader about his affection for the water: "I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator [...]. This short period proved amply long enough to erase from my memory the shadows, and bring out in vivid light all the pleasurable exciting points of color, all the picturesqueness, of the late perilous accident" (757). This first description of Pym's aspirations for life at sea is optimistic although maybe unrealistic, and the reader should expect change shortly. Pym's initial voyage on the *Grampus* is the first time he becomes disillusioned. He initially arrives in a staff cabin, which, despite the small dimensions, provided numerous amenities such as a wardrobe, book shelves, a refrigerator, and culinary delights. This moment of excitement and happiness is cut short when he discovers that such a cabin belongs to his friend Augustus and that he must be concealed in the opening on the floor to conceal his undesired present on the ship. Most ships have crew quarters on a level that is already underwater, while upper levels are allocated for higher rank officials and critical needs. In this regard, it is reasonable to estimate that Pym's little store was at a significantly lower level and hence technically beneath water. After Augustus leaves Pym in his hole, the narrator spends what he perceives to be a long time in darkness. Whatever water he had left was quickly depleted, and thirst and madness overtook him. The possibility of being left for dead is prominent, given how long it had been since Augustus came down to check on his partner.

In this initial section of the story, water is seen by the narrator as a necessity for his life, and without it death is sure to come. "At length I once more arose, and busied myself in reflection upon the horrors which encompassed me. For another twenty-four hours it was barely possible that I might exist without water" (761). As Augustus finally

arrives to pull Pym from of his deathbed, the concept of above and below, which is examined in the study of this narrative, begins to take impact. Unlike previous Poe stories, which use water as a metaphor of death and misery, the narrator reveals the reader the true perils at sea: mankind. This concept may be observed when he begins to refer to the mutineers as *villains*. “The villains now went upon deck, taking my friend with them after having secured his arms behind his back” (775).

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* can be read as the account of a man who perceives the ship’s deck as a source of life, while the spaces below deck and the ocean itself are associated with death. While the ocean presents natural dangers, much of the peril arises from human actions, errors, and conflicts. For instance, the mutiny aboard the *Grampus*, the subsequent shipwreck, and the dire circumstances that follow are direct results of human decisions and interpersonal dynamics. Pym’s decisions continually move the reader through these literal and figurative highs and lows, creating a rhythm of tension and uncertainty that mirrors the unpredictable motion of the sea. Yet the narrative challenges the notion that water alone is deadly: much of the danger arises not from the ocean’s natural power but from human actions, errors, and conflicts. In this way, Poe complicates the conventional ecophobic reading of maritime fiction. Rather than portraying water as the primary threat, the story suggests that humanity’s disruption of natural equilibrium—through violence, misjudgment, and interference—is often the true source of peril. This perspective not only foregrounds human vulnerability but also encourages reflection on ecological and ethical responsibilities, highlighting the interplay between human agency and the indifferent forces of the nonhuman world.

As Pym and his fellow companions begin to fear that lingering deprivation will claim their lives, Dirk Peters, one of the four surviving passengers, proposes venturing below deck, where water has flooded in, in search of food and drink. Amidst the chaos, fear, and uncertainty that dominate the men’s experience, the ocean paradoxically emerges as a stable and unchanging presence. Poe underscores this calm: “it was dead calm, with the sea as smooth as I have ever known it” (811). This moment highlights the duality of the natural world in Poe’s maritime narratives: while the ocean can inspire terror and threaten human survival, it can also offer a deceptive sense of order and continuity. The sea’s constancy emphasizes the human tendency to project meaning onto natural phenomena, revealing both our dependence on and our vulnerability

within these vast, nonhuman systems. In this way, the ocean becomes a mirror for human psychological states, reflecting fear, hope, and the tenuous grasp of agency in an environment that is morally indifferent and unpredictably powerful.

As the narrative progresses, Pym's perception of water as a symbol of death and misery is continuously complicated by the behavior of those around him. Humanity itself becomes a source of threat, as the very individuals who should provide support and solidarity reveal their capacity for desperation and moral collapse. A striking example occurs when Parker, once a hardworking and humane figure, succumbs to the horror of their situation and urges the surviving men to resort to cannibalism, proposing that one man must sacrifice his life for the survival of the others. Poe narrates, "There was about him an air of self-possession which I had not noticed in him until now, and before he opened his lips my heart told me what he would say. He proposed, in a few words, that one of us should die to preserve the existence of the others" (816). This moment not only shocks the reader but also underscores the fragile boundary between civility and savagery when human beings are pitted against extreme environmental forces. The narrative suggests that danger and mortality in the maritime world are not solely imposed by nature, but could also emerge from a human responses to nature and its power, highlighting the intertwined vulnerability of humans and the ethical dilemmas provoked by ecological precarity.

This discussion aligns closely with ecocriticism's focus on human relationships with the physical environment, emphasizing how literature can illuminate both psychological and cultural responses to natural forces. Hester Blum, an early proponent of the maritime turn in literary studies, exemplifies this perspective by exploring the interaction between humans and the sea, suggesting that oceans are not merely settings or metaphors but active, nonhuman agents that shape human experience. She links cultural interchange to an oceanic interpretation of literary texts, arguing that such a perspective can enhance our understanding of historical and environmental events: "If our perspectives have been repositioned in recent decades to consider history from the bottom up, or the colonizer as seen by the colonized — to gesture to just two critical reorientations — then what would happen if we take the oceans' nonhuman scale and depth as a first critical position and principle?" (Blum, 152). By foregrounding the ocean's nonhuman agency, Blum invites readers and critics to reconsider the hierarchy between

human and natural forces, encouraging an analysis that situates human anxieties, ambitions, and cultural encounters within the broader, often indifferent dynamics of the marine environment. In this way, ecocritical reading not only deepens literary interpretation but also underscores the ethical and philosophical implications of humanity's engagement with the natural world.

Another important aspect of this narrative is the overwhelming geographical and scientific (namely concerning natural history) information embedded in the story. Not only does it situate human action within a vast and often hostile natural environment, but it also provides detailed descriptions of oceans, islands, ice fields, and polar regions. Even when Poe does not explicitly foreground these details, in passages on "A Descent into the Maelstrom" such as "We Norwegians call it the Moskoe-ström, from the island of Moskoe in the midway" (581) serve as a secondary source of information, adding factual depth to the narrative. From an ecocritical perspective, this underscores human vulnerability in the face of an overpowering environment. By naming and situating specific locations, Poe also emphasizes the interconnectedness of global maritime routes of his time. For example, he notes, "Between Lofoden and Moskoe, the depth of the water is between thirty-six and forty fathoms; but on the other side, toward Ver (Vurrgh), this depth decreases so as not to afford a convenient passage for a vessel, without the risk of splitting on the rocks, which happens even in the calmest weather" (Poe, 581). In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* we get a similar geographical reference "We afterward passed Prince Edward's Island, leaving it also on our left; then, steering more to the northward, made, in fifteen days, the islands of Tristan d'Acunha, in latitude 37° 8' S., longitude 12° 8' W" (133)

These detailed geographic descriptions emphasize the ocean's immensity, eliciting a dual response of fascination and fear in the reader. Such portrayals resonate with ecocritical concerns about the "nonhuman scale" of nature, as discussed by scholars like Hester Blum, by highlighting how vast and autonomous natural systems exist beyond human comprehension or control. Through literature, readers are invited to confront these overwhelming forces, imagining both their physical and symbolic power. Moreover, geographic detail functions as more than descriptive backdrop; it shapes moral and ethical decision-making within the narrative. Characters' survival often hinges on their ability to interpret, respect, or misread environmental conditions,

demonstrating that human agency is deeply entwined with ecological context. In this way, Poe's attention to geography and the natural sciences underscores the complex interplay between humans and the natural world, illustrating how environmental forces can dictate both action and consequence, and prompting readers to consider the ethical responsibilities inherent in interacting with powerful, nonhuman systems. It also allows us to situate the narrative within a historicized and localized context, enabling an ecocritical analysis of how the story reflects the environmental anxieties, maritime dangers, and broader societal fears of the early nineteenth century. By considering the conditions of seafaring, exploration, and human interaction with the natural world at the time, we can better understand how Poe dramatizes both the power of the ocean and the consequences of human decisions.

Furthermore, the geographical locations in Poe's narrative provide a valuable way to parallel the ecocritical discussion with real-world environmental issues. Poe wrote *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in the 1830s, a period not only marked by the early environmental consequences of the Industrial Revolution but also by the intensification of fishing and whaling. According to the Science and Media Museum, colonial North Americans began whaling commercially in the 1650s, and by the 1830s the industry had expanded into a global system. "Whalers started by hunting right whales and humpback whales near the coast, particularly Nantucket, but—like their North European counterparts—they were soon lured further away in search of the sperm whale" ("A History of Whaling," online). This historical reality should be taken as a backdrop for the events in Poe's narrative: while whaling is not directly mentioned in *Pym*, the global expansion of maritime industries contextualizes the characters' journeys, emphasizes the ocean as both a site of opportunity and danger, and situates the text within a broader framework of human exploitation of marine environments. This geographical contextualization also surfaces, as we previously analysed, in "Ms. Found in a Bottle" and "Decent into the Maelstrom."

In conclusion, Edgar Allan Poe's sea narratives reveal a profound engagement with the ocean as both a literal and symbolic force, reflecting humanity's vulnerability and fascination with the natural world. Unlike in the poems, where water is a powerful element but nonetheless is used in a symbolical way to set up a suggestive environment, stories such as "Manuscript Found in a Bottle", "A Descent into the Maelstrom", and *The*

*Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* present water as a pervading, overwhelming, almost sentient presence that challenges human understanding and control. Through detailed imagery, tone, and narrative perspective, Poe emphasizes the duality of fear and awe that the ocean inspires, illustrating both the ecophobia and ecocritical awareness inherent in his work. These narratives underscore the necessity of acknowledging the power and unpredictability of nature, revealing the limits of human knowledge and control, while highlighting the transformative impact of the natural environment on human consciousness. Ultimately, Poe's treatment of the sea encourages readers to reflect on humanity's fragile relationship with the environment, demonstrating that the true horror lies not in the supernatural, but in the boundless, indifferent forces of the natural world.

## Conclusion

We currently find ourselves in an era characterized by ongoing and accelerating ecological transformations. Although these shifts may not always be immediately perceptible in daily life, the environmental changes we are witnessing today are in fact the cumulative outcome of decades—if not centuries—of human activity and natural processes that have progressively altered the planet's ecosystems. In examining these transformations, it becomes essential to look backward into history, not as an exercise in nostalgia but as a means of understanding the trajectory that has brought us to the present moment. By tracing such patterns, we are better equipped to anticipate the futures we are in the process of constructing. More significantly, this retrospective analysis enables us to recognize the role of literature as a cultural and intellectual force capable of raising awareness about environmental crises, thereby urging societies to take meaningful action before crossing irreversible thresholds.

The principal aim of this project has been to undertake a close study and critical analysis of the literary works of Edgar Allan Poe through the theoretical lens of ecocriticism. This approach not only allows for a deeper exploration of Poe's texts in relation to environmental thought but also demonstrates the broader applicability of ecocritical perspectives to literary studies as a whole. By doing so, the project aspires to show that literature, far from being a passive reflection of its time, can serve as a powerful medium through which ecological consciousness is fostered and environmental concerns are articulated across different periods and genres.

The initial intention of this project was to situate the works of Edgar Allan Poe within their historical context, paying particular attention to the ecological, social, and geographical conditions of the period in which they were produced. This line of inquiry remains an important objective that I aspire to develop further over time, should the opportunity for extended research present itself. However, as the writing process unfolded, I found myself increasingly drawn toward a more introspective dimension of analysis—namely, a reflection on the personal significance that literature holds for me as both a reader and a researcher.

In this sense, literature has assumed a dual function within the framework of this

study. On the one hand, it has served as a critical tool for anchoring Poe's texts to the historical moment of their creation, thereby shedding light on the ways in which literary production is inevitably shaped by its cultural and ecological context. On the other hand, literature has also emerged as a forward-looking force, pointing toward a horizon of possibility in which heightened ecological awareness may contribute to the imagining of a more sustainable and equitable future. Through these dual roles—historical contextualization and future-oriented ecological engagement—literature demonstrates its unique capacity to mediate between past experience and prospective transformation. This study has sought to demonstrate the ways in which ecocriticism, ecohorror, and the broader discourse of the Anthropocene provide valuable frameworks for understanding the intersection between literature and the environment. Throughout the first chapter we went through the evolution of ecocriticism with the intention to discover which roots of the field would be applicable to the intent of this project. From its early pastoral focus to its present-day interdisciplinary engagement with ecological science, cultural studies, and posthumanism, ecocriticism revealed how literature functions as both a mirror and a critique of humanity's shifting relationship with the natural world.

Because it was important to relate literature and environmental crisis, the understanding of the Anthropocene, as both a scientific and cultural concept, underscored the extent to which human activity has reshaped the planet and destabilized traditional binaries between nature and society. Throughout the research, the subfield of ecohorror emerged as a particularly powerful mode of expression (especially when studying Poe), foregrounding the fears, anxieties, and consequences of ecological disruption while rejecting idealized depictions of nature as harmonious or passive. This

Edgar Allan Poe's works, when read through these lenses, illustrated how literature anticipates and intervenes in ecological discourse. His depictions of nature as unstable, threatening, and often hostile resist romanticized traditions and instead highlight the vulnerability of humanity when confronted with forces beyond its control. Stories such as "A Descent into the Maelstrom" exemplified how ecohorror and ecogothic tropes destabilize anthropocentric assumptions and offer visions of ecological entanglement that resonate strongly with contemporary environmental concerns. In this way, Poe's narratives function not only as literary artifacts of their time but also as

enduring reflections on the complex and entangled relationship between humanity and the natural world. His stories evoke both fear and awe, using the power of metaphor and Gothic imagery to explore ecological concepts and the unpredictability of nature. By immersing readers in environments that are simultaneously beautiful, threatening, and morally indifferent, Poe encourages reflection on human vulnerability, responsibility, and ethical engagement with the natural world. Such narratives have the potential to shape perception, prompting readers to value and interact with their surroundings more consciously and, in some cases, fostering a broader awareness of environmental issues, including the implications of climate change.

Ultimately, the dialogue between literature and ecology highlights the importance of cultural narratives in shaping our understanding of the environment. The Anthropocene compels us to reconsider the boundaries between human and nonhuman, and ecocriticism—whether terrestrial, aquatic, or Gothic—offers a critical methodology for interpreting these shifting relationships. Poe’s writings, far from being relics of Gothic tradition alone, demonstrate how literature can anticipate ecological anxieties that remain pressing today. In recognizing the capacity of literary texts to both reflect and reshape ecological consciousness, this thesis emphasizes the vital role of literature in addressing the challenges of environmental change and in imagining possible futures beyond the crises of the present.

Building on the ways literature can shape ecological consciousness, it is important to situate these narratives within their historical and material contexts. The Industrial Revolution marked a pivotal moment in human history, driving technological advancement and economic growth while simultaneously intensifying environmental degradation. Increased reliance on fossil fuels, industrial waste, and urban expansion contributed to carbon emissions, polluted waterways, and strained natural resources. Scientific awareness of these consequences emerged gradually, but the environmental impacts were immediate and profound. Historical events like the Little Ice Age further illustrate the influence of climatic fluctuations on societies, linking environmental instability to human suffering and anxiety. Modern ecological concerns, including eco-anxiety, demonstrate that fears about environmental collapse are both historical and contemporary, reflecting a long-standing continuum of human vulnerability to the forces of nature.

Literature, particularly Gothic and maritime narratives, provides a lens through which to explore these anxieties. Ecohorror and eco-gothic genres, exemplified by the works of Edgar Allan Poe, portray nature as a powerful, sometimes malevolent presence, highlighting humanity's precarious position within the environment. Poe's depictions of the sea, decay, and supernatural encounters with natural forces resonate with contemporary ecological concerns, illustrating the psychological and cultural dimensions of environmental crises. Similarly, Maritime Gothic literature portrays the ocean as a liminal, threatening space, reflecting both historical and ongoing ecological anxieties. Through these narratives, literature not only mirrors environmental disruption but also encourages reflection on humanity's responsibility toward the natural world, emphasizing that nature is an active, formidable, and morally consequential force.

Edgar Allan Poe's stories are haunting, with fear serving as a constant state of mind for his characters. Among these fears, anxiety about water and the overwhelming power of nature is particularly prevalent. In Poe's narratives, the ocean is not merely a backdrop; it symbolizes forces far beyond human control. These works convey a cautionary message: humans are naive to believe they can dominate nature.

This is tested throughout the works discussed in this article. In chapter three, we examine the symbolism of "Dream-Land" and see how Poe's lyrical depiction of water and the natural environment emphasizes the importance of gothic literature in the present theme of ecology. Water acts as a dynamic force, shaping the tale and the characters' futures. It also serves as a mirror against which we can compare the characters and their choices throughout the poem. "The City in the Sea" and "Annabel Lee" both function in similar ways. Poe elicits ecophobic fears when he depicts a bad interaction between his human characters and water.

To relate this study to the current environmental issue, Poe's narratives in "MS. Found in a Bottle," "A Descent into the Maelstrom," and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* are employed. They not only depict water as a presence that defies human control, which is linked to environmental difficulties caused by the overuse and abuse of natural resources, but they also emphasize the importance of recognizing the limits of human control over it. Once we grasp this, the opportunity of a dialog about good change begins.

The influence of ecological disasters on our perceived strength highlights human psychological fragility in the face of the ocean's vast and indifferent power. Our awareness today of environmental degradation intensifies this unease, which reflects concern over humanity's role in the rising frequency of tsunamis, earthquakes, and ozone depletion.

It is critical to recognize that contemporary fears differ significantly from those of the 1800s, when Poe's stories were first published. Nevertheless, both reflect a paradoxical human condition. In many of Poe's works, the ocean's vastness and storms emphasize human fragility. Settings—whether a ship, island, or the open sea—often amplify isolation and psychological suffering, paralleling humanity's current ecological predicament. Poe's ambivalent relationship with water exemplifies ecophobia, manifesting as fear, hostility, or unease in the face of the natural world.

The terror arises not only from physical danger but from the ocean's incomprehensible, sublime vastness, mirroring the unknowable depths of the unconscious and human vulnerability. In this context, the story dramatizes early ecological anxiety, anticipating modern awareness of environmental instability, while emphasizing the Gothic imagination's capacity to explore the tension between human fragility and nature's overwhelming power.

In stories such as "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelström," water becomes a symbol of both psychological dread and ecological force, highlighting human fragility in the face of immense, indifferent natural systems. The ocean's violence and unpredictability, amplified by isolation and extreme settings, mirrors the psychological unease described by Freud as signal anxiety, in which fear anticipates overwhelming trauma and provokes defensive responses.<sup>9</sup> Poe's literary treatment anticipates modern ecological anxiety, as industrialization and fossil-fuel reliance have intensified water pollution, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events, demonstrating humanity's paradoxical role as both creator and victim of environmental instability. Applying Estok's concept of ecophobia, Poe's ambivalent relationship with water exemplifies a broader cultural tendency to undervalue, exploit, and fear nature,

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<sup>9</sup> Such descriptions of harsh natural surroundings can also be read symbolically using Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytic method, which highlights how exterior landscapes in literature frequently mirror unconscious processes and buried anxieties (*Psychanalyse des contes de fées*, 1939). This, however, would have to be further explored in another study.

revealing a persistent tension between human ambition and environmental reality. Moreover, Timothy Morton's notion of dark ecology underscores the Gothic's capacity to confront the decay, destruction, and unpredictability inherent in natural systems, challenging idealized perceptions of harmonious nature and emphasizing the importance of acknowledging ecological harm and uncertainty (Morton 5). In this way, Gothic literature might do much more than reflect cultural anxieties; it embodies the complex, unsettling, and ethically charged relationship humans have with the nonhuman world.

By linking Gothic fear to ecological awareness, Poe's narratives illuminate how water functions as a potent symbol of both death and environmental power, reflecting historical anxieties of the Industrial Revolution while foreshadowing contemporary debates about sustainability, climate change, and humanity's precarious relationship with the natural world. In this way, the Gothic imagination transforms water from mere literary motif into a lens for understanding the psychological, cultural, and ecological stakes of our current environmental crises.

While Gothic literature, as seen in Poe's works, exposes the psychological and ecological anxieties provoked by nature's power, contemporary humans often respond to environmental crises with skepticism, assuming that ecological catastrophes are inevitable. Poe's narratives remind us that fear and awe can provoke reflection, and similarly, lead us to acknowledge the consequences of our actions in the real world—rather than resigning ourselves to inevitability. While societal progress and technological development are important, cultivating awareness of environmental impact, as literature encourages, is a necessary step toward ethical engagement and responsible stewardship of the natural world.

In conclusion, literature serves as a crucial tool for cultivating public awareness of both human and environmental challenges. Edgar Allan Poe's maritime Gothic imagination demonstrates how fiction can mirror societal fears, using water, storms, and other overwhelming natural forces to reflect humanity's anxieties and vulnerabilities. By examining these narratives through an ecocritical lens, connecting Gothic fear with concepts such as ecophobia and dark ecology, we see how literature captures the tension between human ambition and the uncontrollable realities of the environment. Historical contexts, such as the Industrial Revolution, remind us that the anxieties

depicted in Gothic literature were not merely imaginative—they corresponded to tangible ecological and societal transformations. Reflecting on these literary portrayals encourages us to confront past and present environmental crises thoughtfully, fostering awareness and responsibility. Ultimately, Gothic literature—and literature more broadly—offers a space to imagine the consequences of human action, to explore our ethical obligations to the natural world, and to inspire a more conscientious and ecological approach to the future.

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