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Understanding Death in Brown and Poe: Backgrounds and Continuities

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“Thus early had that one guest—the only guest who is certain, at one time or another, to find his way into every human dwelling—thus early had Death stepped across the threshold of the House of the Seven Gables!” (Hawthorne 8)

In Chris Wedge’s animated film, Epic, death is a villainous figure, personified in the form of Mandrake, the King of Rot. This contemporary interpretation asserts that death is a force that must be overcome by the life of the forest,
embodied by Queen Tara and her army of green Leafmen. Death is not welcome in the forest; it seeks only to destroy life. Mandrake speaks in the film of the “borders” erected around his island of Rot by the Leafmen, all “in the name of balance.” “Well, I’m sick of balance,” he says (Wedge). The solution *Epic* offers to the problem of death is to fight it. When death rebels against the boundaries set by life, it must be eradicated.

While this response at first appears heroic, it presents a number of difficulties and complications regarding the presumed “defeat” of Death that are never resolved. For example, at the end of the film, the viewer never learns what happens to Mandrake’s island of Rot after he is absorbed into a tree. Is death truly eradicated? If so, will the denizens of the forest live forever? Will they retain their youth?

Though the film does not address these concerns, *Epic* engages with an essentially timeless problem that is treated in such early texts as Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale” and emerges again in American gothic texts, such as Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat.” All three offer a similar, alternative answer to Chris Wedge’s villainous characterization of death. Their answers acknowledge death as undesirable but also concede that it is a necessary function in the mechanics of the world. In Chaucer’s tale, for example, three rambunctious young men go out to seek Death in the hopes of killing him—“we wol sleen this false traitour Deeth” (PTl. 699)—but cannot avoid his grasp. Similarly, Brown and Poe reach back into the treasure trove of folklore and medieval narrative
to comment on the nature of a reality that is impossible to escape.

S.G.F. Brandon, in “The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions,” points to Paleolithic understandings of death, particularly in the burial rituals known to be a part of early cultures. Such “mortuary practice,” he suggests, “whatever its origin may be thought to have been…must presuppose some reflection about death, which would surely in turn have involved some speculation about the cause of death” (317). Even from such early stages of human history, death played a significant role in society and in cultivating attitudes toward life and the future in general. Brandon goes on to conclude that “Paleolithic peoples were likely to have inferred that death by disease must be due to the attack of some agent whom they could not see, but of whose activity they had such doleful proof” (318). It is important to consider how attitudes and perspectives towards death have evolved over the ages and to examine the warnings implicit in texts such as Chaucer’s, Brown’s, and Poe’s in relation to the view of death as a sentient being, orchestrating and planning the end of life as Mandrake does.

In Chaucer’s tale, Death holds power over the rioters, despite their arrogant declaration that they will find and destroy it. This power is revealed especially in the youngest of the three. After the rioters embark on their quest to seek Death, they are informed by an Old Man they encounter upon the road that Death awaits them under a nearby tree. The Old Man himself seeks Death, although he cannot find it, claiming that “deeth, allass, ne wol not han
[his] lif” (PT l. 727); that he must walk “lik a restelees caitif [as longe time as it is Goddes wille]” (PT ll. 726-28). Here, Death is something desired, a conclusion for which the Old Man longs but which he cannot find. While a contemporary film such as Epic would celebrate the Old Man’s immunity from Death, “The Pardoner’s Tale” uses it to highlight the difficulties of immortality without eternal youth, showing the consequences of endless life that necessarily brings with it the unavoidable and debilitating complications of old age.

Yet, while the Old Man cannot find Death, Chaucer’s three rioters have no such trouble. Upon reaching the grove, they discover baskets of gold, Death embodied within the guise of greed. The youngest of the three is tasked with returning to town for food and drink while the other two remain with the gold until nightfall. Once the youngest leaves, the others plan to kill him when he returns so that the treasure might be divided among two rather than three (PT ll. 760-836). The youngest, enthralled by a similar selfish desire for the gold, says,

O Lord…if so were that I mighte
Have al this tresor to myself allone,
Ther is no man that liveth under the trone
Of God that shoulde live so mirye as I!
(PT ll. 840-4)

The subsequent three lines are particularly significant. Chaucer writes, “And atte laste the feend, oure enemy, / Putte in his thoght that he shoulde poison beye, / With which he mighte sleen his felawes tweye” (PT ll. 844-6). Notably, it is Death—“the fiend, our enemy”—that gives this rioter
the idea to buy poison and kill his companions. However, it is not an idea that materializes spontaneously. Instead, Death is able to manipulate the man’s already murderous thoughts, cultivating the seed planted there. The young rioter becomes Death’s agent, chosen not randomly or arbitrarily but rather because of his predisposition toward killing.

Another aspect of Chaucer’s commentary on death is its reality in the lives of mankind and a warning against any attempt to destroy Death as the rioters seek to do. Elizabeth Hatcher writes of Chaucer’s young men as follows:

idealistic simpletons, they intend to create a utopia of life without death in one ironically death-dealing stroke. When they have slain Death, no one will ever die again—and the world will therefore be perfect…. [T]his plan parodies Christ’s redemptive act:…his [death] overcame the death of the soul whereas theirs aims to overcome the death of the body; his preserved but transcended the natural mortality of the individual whereas theirs aims to subvert the state of nature. (247 emphasis added)

In attempting to create a perfect world in which no one dies, the rioters ignore the consequences that such an attempt will bring, creating a world in which people live endlessly—and at the same time, suffer forever the pains of old age.

Authors in the American gothic tradition also attempt to understand how death may be a necessary part of life, counteracting the prevailing sentiments of optimism, progress, clarity and order typical of the Age of Reason. They rekindle the emotions connected with death, and in
doing so, they attempt to discredit imprudent efforts to evade the Reaper’s call. This sentiment finds expression in the depiction of death, since it can strike anywhere at any time, often without cause or explanation. In the gothic tale, death acquires its own countenance, its own voice, and its own character that gives it a personality, a substance, and an agency. However, it is not an agency without purpose, as Gary Farnell, in “Gothic’s Death Drive,” reveals. Quoting Pope Pius VI, Farnell writes, “In all living beings the principle of life is no other than that of death: at the same time we receive the one we receive the other, we nourish both within us, side by side” (592). This juxtaposition of life and death offers a way of viewing death as essential to life, a concept manipulated and embraced by gothic writers.

In Wieland, death has a voice that ultimately convinces Theodore Wieland to become its agent. Chapter Nineteen begins with Wieland producing his defense against the charge of murdering his wife and children. He does not deny the act. In fact, he says, “You know that they are dead, and that they were killed by me. What more would you have?” It is as if his will is somehow being subverted or manipulated by an external force. In fact, while she is being attacked by Wieland, Catharine refers to his having been possessed by “a fury resistless and horrible” (ch. 19), suggesting that Wieland is, in fact, controlled by some other being. Wieland himself also indicates a lack of agency, claiming that “to rebel against [his] mandate was impossible” (ch. 19). Some power overcomes his free will, issuing a mandate that consumes him. That power is death itself.
Quoting a text from the Greco-Roman period, Brandon expands upon the notion of death’s calling: “Everyone to whom [Death] calleth comes to him straightaway, their hearts being affrighted through fear of him…Yet he turns not his face towards [those who petition him], he comes not to him who implores him, he hearkens not when he is worshipped; he shows himself not, even though any manner of bribe be given him” (321). This echoes the plight of Chaucer’s Old Man and also provides a context in which to examine Brown’s text. In Wieland, Clara, the text’s narrator and Wieland’s sister, also at times seems to be calling for death, but it is a plea fueled by motives different from the Old Man’s. Through much of the story, Clara Wieland expresses a concern about her impending doom, especially a preoccupation about the uncertain time and nature by which it might take place. Clara proclaims, “Death must happen to all. Whether our felicity was to be subverted by it tomorrow, or whether it was ordained that we should lay down our heads full of years and of honor, was a question that no human being could solve” (ch. 6). Her concern appears to be centered on the seemingly arbitrary and capricious nature of death rather than the ailments and pains of the Old Man who desires Death as a release from the infirmities of advanced age. Clara provides an answer to the Old Man’s dilemma: “Men can deliberately untie the thread of life” (ch. 25), even admitting that she had “deemed herself capable [of it] (ch. 25). Suicide, then, appears as a solution to the uncertainty of when death will strike and a means by which one can find release. It responds to
the arbitrariness of a sentient Death who seems to assert complete control over the lives of men, deciding when and where they will pass from this life into the next.

But it is a problematic answer, a fallacy of self-empowerment that does not free one from the power of death. Clara, at one point, views her penknife as a method by which she can “baffle [her] assailant, and prevent the crime by destroying [herself]” (ch. 10). Clara’s fear of the unknown—of what Carwin might do to her—compels her to seek refuge in an equally uncertain course of action. The path that lies beyond death’s gate is as inscrutable as what might lie in wait behind Clara’s closet door. Yet, in contemplating suicide, Clara attempts to assert her own autonomy, leaving the choice of life and death not in her assailant’s hands (or death’s) but her own. Her self-agency is valued more than her life. But Clara’s desire for death is problematized further when one recognizes her age and condition. While the Old Man in the “Pardoner’s Tale” may have a valid reason for seeking Death, Clara is still in her prime, with the potential for a full life ahead of her. Though both Clara and the Old Man seek death, the latter demonstrates the folly of seeking physical immortality while the former highlights the folly of an undue fear of death—in fearing the power and inscrutability of death, Clara nearly submits to it, sooner than would have been, by nature, required of her.

To further press this fear of an arbitrary and capricious death, Brown writes that, when Theodore Wieland goes to his sister’s house to discover if any
ill-thing has happened to her, he [Wieland] encounters a vision, “luminous and glowing. It was the element of heaven that flowed around,” Wieland claims. “Nothing but a fiery stream was at first visible; but, anon, a shrill voice from behind called upon me to attend” (ch. 19). This voice subsequently convinces Wieland to kill his wife, coaxing him into murder just as Death encouraged Chaucer’s young rioter to do the same. However, in *Wieland*, death is not an image of darkness. It is not a “fiend, our enemy,” a Reaper shrouded and cloaked, as Chaucer presents it in the “Pardoner’s Tale,” or a heap of gold that embodies death in the sins of greed and gluttony. Instead, it is depicted as light and is strangely reminiscent of God. Described by Wieland as “the element of heaven,” a “fiery stream” that engulfs him yet does not burn him as it did his father (ch. 19), this conflation of death and heaven may suggest that the two are interchangeable. Wieland tells Clara that “if a devil has deceived [him], he came in the habit of an angel” (ch. 25). But how can an angel demand death, unless it is the Angel of Death? Clara questions the events surrounding her father’s mysterious demise, wondering if it is “fresh proof that the Divine Ruler interferes in human affairs, meditates an end, selects, and commissions his agents, and enforces, by unequivocal sanctions, submission to his will” (ch. 2). Brown explores the source of death by questioning its character and suggests, through Clara, that perhaps the source of life is also the source of death, building upon Chaucer’s depiction while at the same time establishing a fresh perspective.
In traditional Hebrew philosophy regarding mortality, “God is regarded as ultimately responsible for [an] individual’s death…Consequently…the dominant view is that death is due to the action of God. However, the tendency to separate Yahweh from direct contact with human affairs seems to have produced the idea of ‘the angel of Yahweh’ as the agent of death” (Brandon 325). This correlation between death and the divine as apparent coadjutors hearkens back to the exclamation of Chaucer’s Old Man, “God yow se” (PT l. 715): “may God protect you,” even as he sends the rioters to their deaths. Thus Death does its work, perhaps under the mantle of God himself, with the giver of life and the taker of it operating in tandem. In Chapter Nineteen of Wieland, Wieland tells Catharine, “I was commissioned to kill thee, but not to torment thee with the foresight of thy death; not to multiply thy fears, and prolong thy agonies.” Death as a servant of heaven does not intend to “torment, multiply fears, or prolong agonies”; however, these aspects of death are often inescapable and may lead to the barriers that arise between contemplations of the horrors of death and meditations on the paradise of heaven.

This distinction, nevertheless, ignores the fact that in order to reach heaven one must first pass through death’s gate. Gary Farnell pushes the argument further, asserting that aspects of Freud’s own theory of the human “death drive” allude to “the interlinking of destruction and creation in an apparent drive within Nature towards death itself” (596). In Theodore Wieland’s case, it is true that he has brutally murdered his wife; but at the same time, he has, presumably,
pushed her through death’s door into the heavenly paradise, attainable only through the reality of human destruction. A world of physical immortality as sought after by Chaucer’s three rioters “would have no heavenly afterlife to inspire its inhabitants to charity,” as Elizabeth Hatcher explains (248). This paradox of death as the necessary precipitate for entry into paradise is embodied in the gothic, a genre that subverts the notion that, despite the sacrifices required for progress, a reasonable balance between happiness and sadness might be found, rejecting Enlightenment ideals that privilege happiness in this life and discount the necessity of death and its function in bringing one truly to eternal peace.

Thus, Theodore Wieland becomes a model for this system, killing not only his wife and children but also his emotions as a husband and father, suppressing the “raptures known only to the man whose parental and conjugal love is without limits” (ch. 19), reinterpreting the traditional happiness found in marriage and parenthood in order to achieve a higher form of happiness. Brown also replaces the customary darkness of morbidity with an environment “luminous and glowing” (ch. 19), vaulting death into a position of dominance and superiority while emphasizing a death that, although powerful and necessary, is also, at times, arbitrary. Wieland’s final role as death’s agent, then, is to take his own life (ch. 26), using the knife that Clara considered for her own destruction. Wieland reaffirms Clara’s earlier sentiments that death indeed has a “hand invisible and of preternatural strength” and that “all places were alike accessible to this foe” (ch. 9), even the hearts and
minds of his agents and victims.

In “Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe’s ‘Berenice,’” Arthur Brown draws from Poe’s perceptions of death to argue that, in dying, humans “leave behind not only the world but also death…ceasing to be man…ceasing to be mortal” (449), as if mankind’s inherent aversion toward death comes not from what it may bring or the unknown that may lie in wait behind death’s door but simply from the fact that once that door is passed through and the threshold is crossed, it can never be crossed again. The end of life marks the beginning of “undying death,” which is “real in its incarnation as writing” (Brown 449). Undying death is more than spiritual or physical immortality: it is the pain and torment of the Old Man, wasting away, lamenting, “Lo, how I vanisshe, flessh and blood and skin” (PT l. 733), his sorrow preserved eternally in Chaucer’s language.

“Death is a mystery which fascinates and repels… It is sublime because it remains a terrifying mystery, not simply unknowable but linked with human desires that we wish to keep unknown,” writes David Morris (309). This paradox exists in Clara, in her fluctuating attraction to death and repulsion by it. She argues that “[t]he will is the tool of the understanding, which must fashion its conclusions on the notices of the sense” (ch. 4). If death remains a mystery, then a misunderstanding of it can lead to a corruption of the will, the greatest and most powerful means by which death can terrorize humanity. Death, as an unseen presence, is difficult to understand via the senses. The effects are discernible, but their cause—particularly until the advent of modern
science—remains inscrutable, as Theodore Wieland often asserts. Hence, a faulty understanding becomes the medium by which Wieland loses his agency and becomes death’s agent. The predominant fear in the text, and the point that the story seems to make, revolves around the arbitrariness of death and the lack of control available to humanity when faced with its call. This does not suggest that death is inherently evil. On the contrary, a misunderstanding of death seems to be the greater evil, and one by which Wieland’s will is corrupted.

In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat,” death does not appear as a heavenly light but rather in the guise of the narrator’s first cat, appropriately named Pluto after the Greek god of the underworld. Of all the other pets supposedly loved by the narrator, this cat is the only one whose name is provided: “Pluto—this was the cat’s name” (79). To explore the ways in which the story attempts to reveal underlying truths about death through the figure of Pluto, it is important to examine several elements of the tale: Pluto’s death and apparent reincarnation in the appearance of the second cat; the narrator’s attitude toward Pluto and his successor; the event that leads to the murder of the narrator’s wife; and, finally, the circumstances surrounding the narrator’s capture and implied demise via the gallows.

When the narrator describes his desire to kill Pluto, despite his former love for the feline, he says:

And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit, philosophy takes no account…Who has not,
a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination...to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for wrong’s sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree. (80)

The first element of this passage that deserves attention is the narrator’s proclaimed “spirit of perverseness.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one who is perverse can be described as “going or disposed to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required; contrary, fickle, irrational.” The word is derived from the Latin perversus, meaning “turned the wrong way, awry, unnatural, abnormal, wrong-headed, misguided, perverted.” If the narrator wants to kill Pluto—embodying an underlying desire to kill death—can the narrator’s actions and desires be defined as “perverse”? Is killing death illogical?

Indeed it is, since it contradicts the very nature of what death is. As the ruler of the dead, death itself cannot be killed, or else it must necessarily submit to its own rule, contradicting the essence of sovereignty. This paradox leads to the second element of the passage: the notion that the
narrator represents a desire to violate some “law” merely because it is such. The law of nature requires all living beings to submit, at one time or another, to the power of death. Any attempt to evade such power indefinitely is contrary to natural law—it is perverse.

And yet, Pluto—death—avoids the narrator prior to the atrocious act. Pluto “fled in extreme terror at [the narrator’s] approach” (80), an act which ultimately leads, according to the narrator, to the advent of the spirit of perverseness. Could the avoidance of death be what truly irritated the narrator? Knowing that death lurked behind closed doors, yet refused to reveal itself plainly? The narrator claims that a third element to this spirit of perverseness is the “longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature” (80). If the violence the narrator will soon perpetrate is truly against his own soul—his own nature—then death must be a part of that nature. Pluto’s avoidance perturbs the narrator since it is a part of himself that flees at his approach. In Greek mythology, Pluto is not simply the god of the underworld but also “a god of the earth’s fertility” (*Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*). This, at first, seems to be a contradiction. However, the processes of nature may provide an explanation. The world often requires death to invigorate new life: animals must die to feed carnivores; vegetation must die to feed herbivores; the cycle of life requires death to play a part, and any attempt to destroy or kill death must necessarily be an attempt to kill life as well. Joseph J. Moldenhauer describes Poe’s own cosmology as one “in which Beauty, Goodness, and
Truth are a Unity—with Death” (qtd. in Thompson 297). The application is relevant here, where “The Black Cat” links death with goodness; the narrator both loves and hates Pluto, and thus both loves and hates death. In truth, Pluto is something of a neutral character, acted upon by the narrator yet never displaying any overt aggression or evil of his own. This portrayal of death, as does Wieland’s, suggests that death is not inherently evil, but nor is it inherently good. It is simply a fact of life, an inevitable reality that remains hidden, unseen, oftentimes ignored, and almost universally avoided.

Thus, the reality of death is never truly unveiled until one’s time has come, perhaps not even then, as “there is none can see him, either of gods or men” (Brandon 321). The narrator is granted this special privilege of seeing death, though he scorns it. Pluto’s successor follows the narrator “with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend” (Poe 83). Yet, rather than accept the affections of the cat, the narrator “avoid[s] the creature” and “[flees] silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence” (Poe 82). The narrator sees the cat/death as a dreadful creature, despite its intrinsic necessity. After he kills Pluto—a futile attempt to kill death itself—he soon understands that death has returned to haunt him. The unnamed new cat sports a white mark on its chest, a mark that “by slow degrees…assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object…, the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the
GALLOWS!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!” (Poe 83).

This nightmare of death surrounds the narrator, overwhelms him, and ultimately seduces him into becoming death’s agent because he cannot bring himself to accept death as a necessary condition of life. He attempts, as he did before, to kill the cat and rid himself of death, to evade it despite the fact that it is most certainly part of him, as it is part of everyone. He says, “Evil thoughts became my sole intimates” (Poe 83), and, “uplifting an axe…I aimed a blow at the animal which…would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished” (84). Yet, it does not, and, enraged by his wife’s interference, the narrator “withdrew [his] arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain” (84). He is goaded not only by his wife’s interference but also by death’s provocation in the form of the gallows-branded cat, “which had been the cause of so much wretchedness” (85). Murder, therefore, becomes an “aesthetic act, for it is One with the design of the Universe as Poe describes it in Eureka” (Thompson 297). The narrator is absorbed by an obsession with death, one that is not entirely in conflict with the design of the universe, since all must die. However, the narrator’s aesthetic inclinations go awry when he perversely directs his death drive towards death itself.

Continuing in his rage, he experiences a fervent urge to kill his cat, “but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of [his] previous anger, and forbore to present itself in [his] present mood” (85). The
narrator fails to learn from his previous mistake, a hubristic one in which he attempts to place himself equal to God in having the ability to kill death. He laments that a cat could cause “for [him]—for [him] a man, fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe!” (83). But it is not for man to destroy death, since this is reserved only to God. In St. Paul’s writings, Death—Thanatos—is “the last enemy that will be destroyed,” being part of a “hierarchy of demonic beings evidently hostile to God, that the Messiah would ultimately subjugate” (Brandon 330-1). This necessarily precludes any human being from killing death, especially before the end-time, since this would assume a level of power equal to that of the Messiah. The narrator, in his hubris, attempts to assume this authority by killing Pluto, thereby upsetting the balance of life and death in the world.

Death’s final appearance in the story—its ultimate victory—comes when it secures the narrator’s discovery by the police, calling attention to the wall in which death itself is now entombed, with a “wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation” (Poe 86). The mingling of diametrically opposed traits appears once more with a final relish: the cat juxtaposes horror and triumph, suffering and exultation. As G. R. Thompson argues, “one cannot claim for the fascinated vision of death and dissolution in Poe’s writings a totally ecstatic and beatific vision. To claim such would be as serious a misreading of Poe as that of those critics Moldenhauer wishes to correct”
(297). Though death at first seems neutral, even benign, when threatened by the narrator with a perverse attempt at destruction, it returns with a vengeance, punishing those who seek to pervert the natural order and escape—or destroy—death.

In *Wieland* and “The Black Cat,” death interacts with the other characters, eliciting emotions, responses, and even dialogue. The character of death in these two texts offers new forms, new modes of viewing mortality, building upon medieval representations that fashion death as a fact of life. Though both of these gothic texts make this concession, they also highlight certain elements of death that generate concern and fear, namely its supposed arbitrariness and the lack of human control when death calls its victims. Despite new depictions of death as a luminous light or as an affectionate black cat, its basic character remains much the same, with slight modifications in each tale. In *Wieland*, Brown questions the nature of death; Wieland “was much conversant with the history of religious opinions, and took pains to ascertain their validity…to settle the relation between motives and actions, the criterion of merit, and the kinds and properties of evidence” (Ch. 3). He sees the “future, either as anterior, or subsequent to death, [as] a scene that required some preparation and provision to be made for it” and he had a “propensity to ruminate on these truths” (Ch. 3). Wieland ponders the reality and nature of death instead of enjoying life and living it to the fullest. He does not espouse an outright desire to slay death as do Chaucer’s medieval rioters or Poe’s narrator; however, his
curiosity about and investigation into the nature of death resemble the inquiry of the rioter who demanded of his knave, “Go bet...and axe redily / What cors is this, that passeth heer forby; / And looke that thou reporte his name wel” (PT ll. 667-9). Wieland worries about life’s changeable elements, resembling his father particularly in regard to his sense that “the vicissitudes of human life were accustomed to be viewed” (Ch. 3). Death, then, chooses as its victim one who obsesses over the nature of life after death rather than one who appreciates and relishes the life given him on earth.

“The Black Cat” highlights a similar injunction against fighting the reality of death. The narrator chooses to reject the natural order of the world—to “subvert the state of nature”—and in doing so escalates his own encounter with mortality. Had the narrator accepted Pluto/death in his life without the perverseness that prompted him to murder, then death would likely have coexisted with him for many more peaceful years to come. However, because the narrator could not accept death as a fact of life, the Reaper engages him as his agent, subverting his will and destroying his agency. The gothic genre suggests a subtle balance between life and death, a balance that Epic loudly rejects, attributing heroism, rather, to the one who destroys death. The gothic contends that while death is a necessary reality of life, it should not overwhelm or consume our lives. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged and given its due credit, for those who deny death also deny life, as those in Chaucer’s tale, Theodore Wieland, and the narrator of “The Black Cat” ultimately discover.
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