

The Art of Narrative Distortion: Manipulating Time, Space, and Psyche in Poe's Short Stories

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Abstract

This study explores the narrative techniques of unreliable narration in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories "Ligeia", "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "Manuscript Found in a Bottle." It investigates how Poe's narrators distort time, space, and psychological perception to construct narrative ambiguity and disorientation amongst the readers. Drawing upon Wayne C. Booth's theory of rhetorical narration and Gerard Genette's narrative structural analysis, this study demonstrates that Poe's narrators do not just merely mislead readers but rather actively immerse them in psychological disorientation and narrative ambiguity. Ultimately, Poe's strategic use of unreliable narration emerges not as a narrative flaw but as a deliberate technique that deepens thematic complexity and reinforces Gothic conventions of instability and uncertainty. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the evolution of unreliable narration in psychological and Gothic fiction and reaffirm Poe's pioneering role in shaping modern narrative practices.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, fragmented storytelling, gothic fiction, temporal distortion, unreliable narration

Introduction

The very notion, or rather the idea, of 'unreliable narrator' has long ruffled the feathers of readers, critics, and theorists alike. By narrating a story through a voice that cannot be fully trusted, authors thus distort the narrative authority, thereby forcing the readers to actively question what is presented as the truth. In a simple sense, an *unreliable narrator* can be defined as any narrator who misleads readers, either deliberately or unwittingly. Wayne C. Booth coined the term for the first time in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) when he defined an unreliable narrator as one who does not act in accordance with the norms of the work (158). This form of narration has since remained as one of the most compelling artworks in literary studies. It is worth noting that, although the first-person unreliable narrator rose to prominence in Western literature during the Modernist period, which was roughly from the end of the 19th century (1890s) to the 20th, "Ligeia" (1838), "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), and "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" (1833), had already made a spectacular use of such narration long before the concept even became a popular trend.

While Booth's concept of unreliable narration has been rather foundational, critical discussions continue to study how unreliable narrators tend to manipulate time and reality. Recent narratological studies by various scholars have emphasized psychological and structural approaches to unreliability of the narrators, but only a few have actually explored the psychological effects of temporal and spatial distortion in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Take, for instance, "When Gothic and Insanity Intertwine: Unreliable Narrators in Early American Horror Stories" by Agnieszka Szopińska,

[...] the aim of my thesis is to juxtapose the way the three American authors exercise one of the most interesting Gothic strategies, namely, insanity, in their fiction. Moreover, my focus is on analyzing the effects this strategy has on the whole narrative and the reader's impressions (Szopińska).

The author clearly focuses on how three American authors use insanity as a Gothic storytelling tool and further explores how this very choice shapes the narrative that affects the way readers experience the story. Similarly, in another article titled "Madness in Connection with Unreliable Narrators, Isolation, and Dubious Family Relationships in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' by Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' By Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James," by Lieke Manssens, the author mentions,

[...] One thing can be said: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Henry James, and Edgar Allan Poe leave certain paths of interpretation open by subtly inserting subtext and gently pushing readers in a certain direction. The ambiguity the three stories display is, and always will be, unresolvable, which means the authors have succeeded in conveying their message and evoking an emotional response in their readers, such as terror, disgust, and unease (Manssens 50).

The author states that the stories are left open to multiple interpretations by weaving in subtle subtext and guiding readers just enough to spark curiosity, and because the ambiguity in these narratives can never be fully resolved, the authors successfully deliver their intended effect, i.e., eliciting feelings of terror, discomfort, and unease in their readers.

This is precisely why this study attempts to examine how Poe deploys this narrative technique in three of his short stories, namely, *Ligeia*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and *Manuscript Found in a Bottle*. This study further aims to explore how the existence of such unreliable narrators, despite the variation in the setting, context, and plot they belong to, focuses on the central theme of time, space, and reality distortion when it comes to narrating their events. This study also aims to investigate how Wayne C. Booth's theory of rhetorical narration from *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and Gerard Genette's analysis of narrative structure from *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* can be applied to examine how Poe employs his narrators to distort time, space, and reality when it comes to narrating the plot, thereby making the readers rely on such unreliable narrators.

Among the selected stories of Poe, "Ligeia," first published on September 18, 1838, is narrated by an unnamed, unreliable narrator. This Gothic-styled fiction (Fingerprint Classics 113) portrays a dark tale of love, infatuation, and the supernatural, and further depicts the fragmented recollections of the narrator by blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is not. Similarly, "The Pit and the Pendulum," first published in 1842, is a short horror story that studies the effect of paranoia and terror on the narrator (Fingerprint Classics 200). As one of Poe's most renowned stories, it is also regarded as a classic in Gothic fiction. Finally, "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" tells the harrowing tale of an unreliable narrator who embarks on a surreal sea voyage. This adventurous sea tale, narrated by an unnamed narrator, was the winning entry of a writing contest by the Baltimore Saturday Visiter, a weekly publication, dated October 19, 1833 (Fingerprint Classics 101). All three of these texts have been well-written through the lens of unreliable narration.

By analyzing how the narrators manipulate time, space, and psyche, the study contributes to broader discussions on narrative ethics, Gothic epistemology, and the psychology of storytelling. It also reaffirms Poe's enduring influence on modern narrative experimentation, positioning unreliability as a cornerstone of both Gothic aesthetics and psychological realism.

Literature Review

Unreliable narration has long been recognized as a hallmark of Gothic and psychological fiction, where narrative distortion intertwines with the depiction of unstable consciousness. Wang Ni, in their research, highlights how Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" employs unreliability as a manifestation of the narrator's nervousness, which foreshadows violence and signals mental disarray (28). Wang's emphasis on the narrator's nervous rhetoric aligns with Booth's view that narratorial presentation, not only factual error, shapes reader response; Wang's observations show how rhetorical cues cue readerly suspicion in Booth's terms. Kresnanda similarly identifies paranoia and obsession as recurrent traits among Poe's narrators, stating that readers effectively look "through the eyes of madness" (21-3). Kresnanda's "eyes of madness" reading resonates with Booth's categories of rhetorical effect (pride, ridicule, collusion), since the narrator's paranoia produces interpretive pleasures and obligations for the reader.

Furthermore, Greta Olson, in his research work, expands the framework by distinguishing between fallible narrators, who misrepresent facts due to error or bias, and untrustworthy narrators, who intentionally deceive. Olson emphasizes the reader's task in detecting narrative signals and reconstructing an implied truth, a process that resonates strongly in Poe's texts, where narrators' biases and psychological conditions skew reality (95). Olson's fallible and untrustworthy distinction aligns with Booth's emphasis on implied-author intent, since detecting a narrator's bias is precisely the rhetorical activity Booth describes. Genette's order or duration can then show how such biases are symbolized in form. Further broadening the scope, Köppe and Kindt, in their research, argue that unreliable narration transcends factual distortion to include evaluative misjudgments and narrative omissions (86). Their distinction between mimetic and thematic unreliability informs this study's analysis of Poe's layered narrative techniques. The authors' shift from pure factuality to evaluative unreliability dovetails with Genette's concern for narrative selection (what is told and how often) and suggests that unreliability should be approached with formal tools as well as rhetorical ones.

Finally, when it comes to Poe's pioneering use of unreliable narration, although the technique is often associated with modernist fiction, it appears quite prominently in Poe's early 19th-century works. Neil Davison highlights that Poe's first-person narrators already subvert omniscient objectivity, thereby offering deeply subjective, fractured perspectives. In a similar sense, in "Ligeia," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," we can see that Poe's narrators blend psychological fragility with narrative manipulation, thereby creating early exemplars of Gothic unreliability.

Moving on, Rachel McCoppin explores how Poe's narrators construct false personas that blur their own identities, leading to narrative collapse (105-106). The unnamed narrators, caught between delusion and reality, embody the Gothic obsession with unstable consciousness. Meng Li furthers this argument by categorizing Poe's unreliable narrators as vehicles for thematic depth and aesthetic estrangement, with spatial and temporal distortions serving to enhance reader alienation (913-15). Davison, McCoppin, and Meng Li all gesture toward the formal dimension of unreliability (identity collapse, fragmentation, and distance), thereby suggesting the value of combining Booth's rhetorical account with Genette's narratological tools to show precisely how psychological states are encoded in form.

Patricia Harkin (413) and Richard Walsh (496), in their respective research, provide additional insight by discussing the reader's complicity in unreliable narratives. Here, both scholars suggest that unreliable narration invites readers into a dynamic interplay of suspicion, detection, and meaning construction, a process Poe masterfully initiates through the fragmented and contradictory storytelling of his narrators. Harkin and Walsh's focus on reader complicity fits Booth's rhetorical model of collusion; their insistence on the reader's role is also made formalizable via Genette's focalization, where the reader is guided by narrative perspective toward or away from the implied author's stance.

Lastly, when it comes to the research gap, it can be noted that while existing texts and articles extensively examine Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" in the context of unreliable narration (Ni 28; Kresnanda 21-3), comparatively fewer studies focus on

"*Ligeia*," "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," and "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*" with particular attention to temporal and spatial distortion. Previous analyses often privilege structural or moral unreliability, overlooking the psychological effects of the distortion of time and space that these stories exhibit. Drawing on Booth's rhetorical theory and Genette's structural analysis, this study bridges the gap by offering an integrated interpretation of Poe's narrative innovations and the functional reliability of unreliable narrators.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach to explore how Edgar Allan Poe employs unreliable narrators to distort perceptions of time, space, and reality in "*Ligeia*," "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," and "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*." As previously mentioned, the research has employed the theoretical approaches of Wayne C. Booth's theory of rhetorical narration and Gerard Genette's narrative structure analysis to analyze the aforementioned primary texts.

The primary texts consist of the three selected short stories, chosen for their exemplary use of unreliable narration in early 19th-century Gothic fiction. These texts were entirely accessed from the *Greatest Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Fingerprint Classics edition). Given that this is a library-based study, this study relies heavily on the secondary sources of data collection, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and books on narrative theory, Gothic literature, and Poe's fiction, which provide contextual and theoretical support for the analysis. Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed publications or recognized monographs in English focusing on narrative unreliability, structural narratology, or Gothic literature.

Talking about the basics of the theoretical framework, the concept of unreliable narration, as previously mentioned, first systematically theorized by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, has become revolutionary in narrative studies. He defines a narrator as unreliable when they "do not speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work" (158). He further proposes that unreliable narration offers reader pleasures through pride, ridicule, and collusion, as readers actively detect narrative inconsistencies.

Booth's emphasis on rhetorical relationships between narrator, implied author, and reader forms the very core theoretical structure of this study. Building upon Booth's rhetorical model, Gerard Genette, in *An Essay in Method*, offers structural insights, particularly through his concepts of order, duration, frequency, and focalization. Genette's analysis highlights how narrative temporality and spatial perception can be manipulated through narrative structure, thereby allowing narrators to warp readers' perception. Together, these foundational theories provide critical lenses for analyzing Poe's narrative strategies, allowing scholars to consider both the narrator's intent and the structural mechanisms that produce ambiguity.

Analytical Framework Integrates:

Rhetorical Narratology (Wayne C. Booth): Used to assess the psychological dimension of unreliability by focusing on the gap between the narrator's assertions and the implied author's norms. Specifically, analysis from his chapter on "*The Uses of Authorial Silence*"

identifies points of reader collusion (pride, ridicule) where the reader detects the narrator's distortion. The theory basically helps assess and understand how Poe's narrators deviate from the implied norms of the text.

Structural Narratology (Gérard Genette): Used to operationalize the technical aspects of temporal and spatial distortion, "with particular focus on how a narrative is structured in a text instead of what is told" (Akimoto 342). Analysis of the conceptual system involves perhaps only two noteworthy innovations, i.e., frequency as an aspect of the temporal structure of narrative, and focalization as a significant reformulation of the concept of "point of view." (Steinby 588). The concept of time and space distribution, according to Genette, is very crucial when it comes to our research, as our primary focus lies on how time and space have been manipulated in Poe's stories.

Lastly, after multiple close reading of each story to identify passages that signal temporal, spatial, and psychological distortion, the researcher conducted thematic coding and textual analyses of the narrative patterns using Booth's rhetorical categories (pride, ridicule, collusion) and Genette's structural concepts (order, duration, focalization), and finally, the comparative analysis was thoroughly done to highlight the common narrative strategies and distinct manifestations of unreliability within all three of the stories.

It is to be noted, however, that the study is library-based and relies heavily on textual and critical sources in English. It focuses exclusively on narrative unreliability within the selected stories of Poe, with special emphasis on their manipulation of time, space, and reality. Cultural, historical, or biographical dimensions, as well as empirical studies on reader reception or neurocognitive models, are beyond the scope of this analysis.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the textual analysis conducted on Poe's "*Ligeia*," "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," and "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*." Guided by Booth's (1961) theory of rhetorical narration and Genette's (1980) structural narratology, the analysis identifies three dominant dimensions of narrative unreliability, namely, the psychological states of the narrators, the temporal and spatial distortions in narrative structure, and the comparative insights on unreliable narration. These dimensions together reveal Poe's deliberate strategy of using unreliable narration as a Gothic framework to further reinforce the instability of reality.

Psychological States of Unreliable Narrators

This section examines how Poe's narrators reflect psychological instability and obsession by discussing Booth's concept of reader pleasure and further explores Genette's theory of focalization when it comes to shaping reader engagement with distorted realities. Booth emphasizes that unreliable narrators often reflect their psychological states through their storytelling. In Poe's works, this is evident in the ways each narrator's rhetoric shapes the entire narrative.

In each of the selected stories, the narrator's psychological condition serves as the primary engine of narrative distortion. For instance, in "*Ligeia*" (113-129), the unnamed narrator's obsession with Ligeia distorts his memory and perception, leading him to idealize her while forgetting crucial details about their relationship and her death. "I CANNOT, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia. [...]" (113-14). This very selective nature of the narrator's memory creates a narrative that is both compelling and questionable, similar to his fixation on her intellect and beauty that colors his entire narrative: "I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the [...]" (114-17). This shows the lens through which he views reality, thereby leading the readers to question the authenticity of his narration. His selective idealization of Ligeia, in contrast with his disdain for his second wife, Lady Rowena, suggests a narrative shaped by grief and delusion rather than objective recollection in itself.

Similarly, "*The Pit and the Pendulum*" (200-16) features a narrator whose profound fear and psychological distress after being sentenced to death during the Spanish Inquisition warp his sense of time and reality. "[...] he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks. There was [...]" (209). The narrative unfolds in a non-linear, disorienting manner, oscillating between dread and fleeting hope. The vivid descriptions of terror and the narrator's unstable grasp on time and events draw the readers into his psychological torment, thereby challenging them to discern fact from the narrator's recount of vivid hallucinations.

Lastly, in "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*" (101-112), the narrator starts as a rational skeptic but gradually succumbs to the supernatural as he encounters inexplicable events aboard a ghostly ship: "I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius — a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime — and the [...]" (101-08). His journey from rationality to madness is mirrored in the increasingly fragmented and surreal narrative, compelling readers to question whether his experiences are real or products of psychological breakdown. Here, it can be observed that the increasing fragmentation of his journal entries mirrors his psychological unraveling, culminating in his acceptance of his doom as he is drawn into the whirlpool.

According to Booth, unreliable narrators offer readers pleasures such as pride (in recognizing inconsistencies), ridicule (at the narrator's failings), and collusion (with the author in seeing through the narrator's distortions). For example, in "*Ligeia*," readers who notice the narrator's obsession clouding his judgment can take pride in seeing beyond his perspective. In "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," dark irony and empathy arise from the narrator's futile struggles, while in "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*," readers are drawn into the narrator's descent into madness, sharing both his skepticism and his eventual acceptance of the supernatural.

However, Booth's concept of collusion extends beyond the reader simply noticing the narrator's distortions. In Poe's Gothic world, the implied author invites the reader to recognize the deeper instability of reality itself. By allowing readers to "see through" the narrators' delusions, Poe frames them in a shared awareness that perception is inherently unreliable.

The collusion, therefore, exposes not merely the narrator's limitations but the broader Gothic premise that truth is fractured, conditional, and forever beyond full comprehension. In this way, Poe uses Booth's rhetorical pleasure to guide readers toward an unsettling insight: that the world of the stories, and perhaps reality itself, cannot be fully trusted.

Similarly, Genette's theory of focalization is key to understanding how Poe's narrators shape reader perception. Each story filters events through the narrator's subjective lens, which is to say, in "*Ligeia*," the narrator's obsession serves as the focal point, with fragmented and contradictory memories that challenge readers to distinguish reality from emotional distortion. In a similar sense, "*The Pit and the Pendulum*" uses intense sensory details and fluctuating perspectives, shifting between moments of clarity and panic, thereby heightening the tension between rationality and fear. Lastly, in "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*," the focalization moves from rationality to madness, with the narrative becoming increasingly surreal as supernatural elements intrude. This very manipulation of perspective compels readers to actively engage with the text, piecing together clues about each narrator's reliability and constructing their own understanding of the narrative's truth.

Temporal and Spatial Distortions

This section focuses on analyzing how the unreliable narrators manipulate time, space, and reality by highlighting spatial and temporal distortion as a means of reinforcing psychological disorientation amongst the readers. This is to say that alongside temporal distortion, spatial dislocation functions as a key strategy for narrative unreliability in Poe's stories. For instance, in "*Ligeia*," the timeline of events is fragmented and non-linear. "I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense-- such as I have never known in woman. In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient, and as far as my [...]" (118-22). The narrator shifts abruptly between memories of Ligeia and his present experiences with Rowena, creating a disorienting chronology that mirrors his obsessive inability to move forward.

Moving on, "*The Pit and the Pendulum*" provides perhaps the most explicit example of temporal distortion. Here, the narrator's perception of time stretches and contracts in response to his psychological state. As he watches the pendulum descend, time seems to slow to an agonizing crawl: "Inch by inch—line by line—with a descent only appreciable at intervals that seemed ages [...]" (210-15). The claustrophobic setting in the story serves as a physical

manifestation of his fear, and as the walls close in around the narrator, we can observe how they symbolize not only physical confinement but also mental entrapment. This spatial distortion enhances the reader's sense of urgency and disorientation, thereby mirroring the narrator's own experience.

Lastly, in "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*", time accelerates as the narrator approaches his fate. Early portions of the manuscript describe measured observations, but as the ship is drawn toward the whirlpool, the narration becomes frantic and compressed. The narrator's declaration that "little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny [...]" (111-12) reflects

a temporal collapse that coincides with his psychological disintegration. His journey into darkness and despair challenges readers to navigate through layers of truth and illusion, thereby prompting them to question what constitutes reality within the layers of each narrative.

It is also quite important for us to note how Genette's concepts of order (Genette 35-48), duration (Genette 86-112), and frequency (Genette 113-60) provide essential frameworks for analyzing how Poe's narrators manipulate time and space. The non-linear progression in the narratives creates confusion regarding the sequence and significance of the events. When it comes to temporal distortions, in "*Ligeia*," take, for example, the narrator frequently shifts between memories of Ligeia and his present circumstances with Lady Rowena (128). For instance, his recollections of Ligeia are often vivid and detailed, yet he admits to gaps in his memory regarding their initial meeting (113). The selective nature of his memory raises questions about the reliability of his narrative, as it suggests that he could be reconstructing events to fit his emotional needs rather than presenting an objective truth.

In "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," however, time is manipulated and distorted through the intense fear and paranoia of the narrator. The pendulum's descent is described with agonizing detail, thereby stretching out time to heighten the suspense (209). Here, we can readily see that the narrator's own body functions as the primary instrument of focalization, thereby shaping how space and time are perceived. His sensory perceptions, like those of his heartbeat, breath, and physical agony, all become the measure of temporal elongation and spatial constriction. The pendulum's descent is not merely described but physically felt, thus transforming the narrator's body into the very axis through which distortion is experienced.

Lastly, in "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*," as the narrator approaches his inevitable doom, time appears to compress. The rapid progression toward disaster reflects the narrator's mental unraveling as he confronts supernatural elements aboard the ghostly ship (111-12). The urgency of his situation creates a frantic pace that contrasts sharply with earlier, more reflective passages, thereby emphasizing his descent into absolute chaos.

As time stretches into an agonizing eternity for the narrator, readers experience this distortion alongside each of the narrators. The sudden revelation of Ligeia at the end of the story, the abrupt rescue by French forces at the story's end, and the sudden disappearance of the ghost ship with the narrator still on it feel almost surreal against the backdrop of their psychological torment. This sudden shift undoubtedly challenges the readers' perceptions of reality within the narrative. Thus, the manipulation of time and space forces readers to confront their own responses to fear and uncertainty when relying on such unreliable narrators.

It is also worth noting that beyond merely reinforcing instability, Poe's manipulation of time, space, and perception ultimately produces a crisis of epistemology. By destabilizing narrative structure, Poe questions whether objective truth is recoverable at all within the Gothic world. Each distortion (temporal collapse in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, fragmented memory in *Ligeia*, and spatial boundlessness in *Manuscript Found in a Bottle*) undermines the narrator's capacity to interpret reality. The reader is, therefore, placed in the same epistemic uncertainty as the narrator, thus forced to confront the very limits of knowledge, perception, and interpretive authority.

Comparative Insights on Unreliable Narration

This section discusses how, despite their differing plots, “*Ligeia*,” “*The Pit and the Pendulum*,” and “*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*” share thematic and structural similarities. All three stories employ unreliable narrators who manipulate time, space, and reality, reflecting their psychological deterioration. This very contrast between Poe’s narrators reveals distinct yet similar dimensions of unreliability across these stories. To put it simply, in “*Ligeia*,” obsession clouds memory; in “*The Pit and the Pendulum*,” terror warps time; while in “*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*,” rationality succumbs to supernatural dread. Despite differences in context and plot, all three narrators share a common theme: their psychological states and how they profoundly influence their perceptions of reality. Which is to say that each narrator embodies Poe’s exploration of the fragility of perception. Thus, by twisting the threads of time, space, and the psyche, Poe has ensured that his unreliable narrators remain as compelling as they are confounding, and in doing so, he meticulously perfects the art of narrative distortion within his stories.

To present these findings concisely, Table 1 summarizes the thematic dimensions across the three stories.

Table 1
Comparative Thematic Analysis of Narrative Distortion in Poe’s Stories

Story	Psychological Distortion	Temporal Distortion	Spatial Dislocation	Reader’s Pleasure (Booth)	Focalization (Genette)
<i>Ligeia</i>	Obsession and selective memory; idealization of Ligeia	Fragmented chronology; cyclical reflection	Domestic space as dream-like enclosure	Pride, Collusion	Internal focalization
<i>The Pit and the Pendulum</i>	Fear-induced hallucination and paranoia	Elastic time perception; prolonged suspense	Constricting physical space mirrors mental confinement	Ridicule, Empathy	Oscillating internal focalization
<i>Manuscript Found in a Bottle</i>	Rationality collapsing into madness	Accelerated tempo toward doom	Boundless ocean and spectral ship as a psychological void	Collusion, Irony	Shift from external to internal focalization

Discussions

Taken together, the patterns that emerge from the analysis reveal that Poe's narrators do not merely distort reality but redefine its very terms. The findings of this study reveal that Poe's use of unreliable narrators in "*Ligeia*," "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," and "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*" is fundamentally structured around the manipulation of time, space, and reality. While each narrator's psychological condition generates the initial disturbance, it is the *distortion of narrative temporality and spatial perception* that transforms individual instability into a broader Gothic experience. Booth's theory of rhetorical narration clarifies how these distortions are not accidental by-products of madness or fear, but the intentional strategies that prompt specific reader responses. Through inconsistencies, selective memories, and perspectival gaps, Poe creates a rhetorical landscape in which the implied author invites the reader to recognize that the narrators' accounts cannot fully be taken at face value. This collusion goes beyond exposing the narrator's limitations, where Poe positions the reader to see that *reality within the Gothic world is never stable to begin with*, and that time and space themselves can be bent, stretched, or even collapsed by a troubled mind.

Genette's narratological framework further demonstrates that Poe uses the structure of narration itself to enact these distortions. Through variations in order, duration, and focalization, each story creates a unique pattern of temporal and spatial instability that mirrors the narrator's psychological state. In "*Ligeia*," fragmented chronology and interior focalization trap the reader within a loop of obsessive recollection, where past and present blur into indistinguishable emotional time. In "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," time dilates and contracts according to bodily sensation, and space becomes a shifting, oppressive force that mirrors the narrator's terror. Meanwhile, in "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*," the narrative accelerates toward collapse, with spatial vastness and temporal compression signaling narrator's descent into the unknown. These examples show that Poe does not merely describe distorted reality; rather, he builds distortion into the form of the narrative, allowing the structure itself to reflect fractured consciousness.

Thus, Booth's rhetorical insights and Genette's structural analysis reveal that the manipulation of time and space is Poe's primary method for constructing unreliable narration. Psychological instability may initiate the distortion, but it is through narrative structure that unreliability is fully realized. Poe, thereby, transforms time into a subjective experience, space into a psychological landscape, and reality into an unstable construct shaped by the limitations of human perception. In doing so, he positions the reader in a shared experience of uncertainty, making unreliability not just a feature of character but a fundamental principle of narrative design.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that Edgar Allan Poe's artistic use of unreliable narrators in "*Ligeia*," "*The Pit and the Pendulum*," and "*Manuscript Found in a Bottle*" operates through deliberate manipulations of psychological states, temporal structures, and spatial realities. By integrating Wayne C. Booth's theory of rhetorical narration with Gérard Genette's structural

narratology, the analysis demonstrates that each narrator's psychological condition, whether rooted in obsession, terror, or cognitive collapse, directly governs the manipulation of narrative temporality and spatial perception. Through Genette's frameworks of order, duration, and focalization, Poe embeds instability into the structure of the narrative itself, ensuring that each distortion directly influences the way the narrative alters chronology, spatial awareness, and the boundaries of reality, with particular emphasis on how temporal and spatial distortions function within these narratives. By doing so, it fills a gap and contributes to broader discussions on the development of unreliable narration in Gothic and psychological fiction.

Poe's manipulation of order, duration, and focalization transforms unreliability into a structural strategy that invites readers to experience the same uncertainty as the narrators. Temporal collapse, spatial confinement, and shifting perception function as intentional narrative choices that blur the line between internal experience and external events. These distortions reveal what this study identifies as Poe's art of narrative distortion, a technique through which psychological instability becomes inseparable from narrative form.

Ultimately, the findings position Poe as a key figure in the development of narrative unreliability. By destabilizing narrative structure itself, Poe places readers in a state of epistemological uncertainty where definitive truth is unattainable. Unreliability thus emerges not only as a character trait but as a defining feature of Poe's Gothic vision, reflecting broader concerns with the limits of perception and the fragility of reality. In shaping time, space, and psyche into unstable narrative elements, Poe anticipates later literary movements that foreground fractured consciousness, making the instability of the mind indistinguishable from the instability of the text.

Future research could build on these insights by examining the cultural and historical contexts that shape Poe's narrative techniques, such as contemporary concerns about death, reason, and the supernatural. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating cognitive psychology could deepen our understanding of how narrative distortion affects reader perception, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between textual unreliability and the reader's experience.

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