

THE LINGUISTIC ARCHITECTURE OF GRIEF AND BEAUTY: A MULTI-LEVEL STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "TO THE RIVER" AND "SPIRITS OF THE DEAD"

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ABSTRACT

Literature constitutes a complex intersection of rhetoric and linguistics, deploying the formal properties of language to evoke profound emotional and intellectual responses. Poetry, Edgar Allan Poe (1848) famously declared, is "the rhythmic creation of beauty"—a definition that foregrounds the intrinsic relationship between the physical properties of language (sound, rhythm, structure) and the abstract concept of aesthetic experience. Stylistics, as the discipline that bridges linguistics and literary criticism, provides the analytical instruments necessary to examine this relationship with empirical rigour. The present study offers a comprehensive, multi-level stylistic analysis of two of Poe's significant poems, "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead," with the aim of illuminating the precise linguistic mechanisms through which the poet constructs atmospheres of melancholy, romanticism, and Gothic terror. Employing an analytical framework that encompasses the phonological, graphological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic levels of language organisation—as theorised chiefly by Leech and Short (2007)—the study examines how Poe's deployment of alliteration, assonance, rhyme scheme, archaic grammar, diction, and punctuation contributes to the distinctive aesthetic coherence of his verse. The analysis reveals that Poe's mastery of sound patterning and graphological arrangement creates a cohesive poetic effect that transcends mere semantic content, transforming conventional language into a vehicle for exploring the sublime and the macabre. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Poe's stylistic fingerprint and validate the utility of stylistics as a tool for the objective study of literary aesthetics. This research further situates Poe's linguistic choices within the broader intellectual context of American Romanticism and the Gothic tradition.

Keywords: stylistics, Edgar Allan Poe, phonological analysis, graphological analysis, Gothic literature, foregrounding, poetry

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Literature is, at its most fundamental level, a creative act that utilises the raw materials of language to construct artefacts of beauty and meaning. It operates through a dual lens: rhetoric, which Corbett (1971) defines as the art of using language to persuade and motivate, and linguistics, which analyses the structural systems through which meaning is generated and communicated. Poetry, widely regarded as the most concentrated form of literary expression, relies especially heavily on the sonic, rhythmic, and visual qualities of language. Its meanings emerge not merely from the semantic content of words but from the shapes those words make on the page, the sounds they produce in the mouth and the ear, and the syntactic arrangements that govern their sequence and emphasis.

Edgar Allan Poe occupies a singular position within American Romanticism and the Gothic tradition. His definition of poetry as "the rhythmic creation of beauty" (Poe, 1848) is not merely a philosophical observation but a compositional manifesto: it asserts that the physical properties of language—its rhythms, its sounds, its formal structures—are not decorative supplements to poetic meaning but constitutive of it. Poe's verse is accordingly distinguished by a degree of formal craftsmanship that rewards close linguistic attention. His poems are not simply about melancholy, death, love, and the supernatural; they enact these themes through the precise orchestration of linguistic form.

Stylistics, as Wales (2014) defines it, is the study of style in language, employing linguistic methodologies to interpret literary texts. It represents the disciplinary bridge between the rigorous descriptive apparatus of linguistics and the evaluative concerns of literary criticism. Unlike traditional literary critical approaches that may rely heavily on biographical interpretation or impressionistic evaluation, stylistics aims to provide an objective account of how a text achieves its effects (Simpson, 2004). According to Widdowson (1975), stylistics acts as a mediating discipline, applying the models of linguistics to literary texts in order to illuminate how meaning

is generated through form rather than in spite of it. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) situate stylistics within the broader intellectual history of twentieth-century linguistics, noting that it emerged partly as a corrective to the subjectivity of earlier critical traditions.

"To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead" represent two complementary dimensions of Poe's poetic imagination. The former is a lyric meditation in which a river serves as a reflective surface for the speaker's romantic obsessions, its flowing waters becoming an emblem of beauty, memory, and the unnamed beloved. The latter is a Gothic encounter with mortality, addressing the living from the vantage point of the grave and insisting on the inescapable proximity of the dead to the living consciousness. Together, these poems span the affective range of Poe's verse—from tender reverie to ominous foreboding—while sharing a commitment to the meticulous construction of sound, structure, and imagery that makes his work so amenable to stylistic investigation.

Problem Statement

Despite the extensive body of scholarship devoted to Poe's literary achievement, analyses of his poetry have tended to concentrate on biographical interpretation, thematic overview, or broad claims about his place within Romantic and Gothic traditions. The specific linguistic mechanisms through which his verse achieves its emotional power have received comparatively less systematic attention. Stylistic devices—the precise patterns of alliteration, the strategic deployment of archaic grammar, the calculated use of punctuation and lineation—are not ornamental features of Poe's poetry. They are the architecture of its meaning. To read Poe's poetry without attending to its linguistic texture (Leech & Short, 2007) is to understand the destination without examining the road that leads there.

The absence of a comprehensive, multi-level stylistic analysis of "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead" represents a gap in the scholarship. Understanding how Poe employs the full range of linguistic resources—phonological, graphological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic—to construct his distinctive aesthetic requires an analytical

framework capable of engaging with all these levels simultaneously, tracing the interactions between them, and demonstrating how micro-level linguistic choices realise macro-level thematic meanings. The present study addresses this gap.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Which prominent phonological and graphological stylistic devices are employed in "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead," and what effects do they produce?
2. How do the grammatical and lexical choices in these poems contribute to their overall semantic content and atmospheric meaning?
3. To what extent do these stylistic elements combine to represent the unique "Poesque" style characterised by the fusion of beauty and melancholy?

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

4. To identify and categorise the prominent stylistic devices—specifically alliteration, assonance, rhyme scheme, and punctuation—used in the selected poems.
5. To analyse the grammatical structure and lexical selection of the poems in order to understand how they construct the personas of the speaker and the subjects addressed.
6. To examine the pragmatic function of these devices, determining how they guide the reader's interpretation of the poems' themes of love, death, and the supernatural.

Significance of the Study

The theoretical significance of this study lies in its contribution to the field of stylistics through the practical application of multi-level linguistic analysis to nineteenth-century American poetry. It bridges the gap between linguistic formalism and literary criticism, validating Verdonk's (2002) assertion that the micro-features of a text are the instruments through which its macro-themes are realised. By demonstrating the analytical value of the Leech and Short (2007) model in a Romantic Gothic context, the study extends the proven

applicability of that framework beyond its original prose fiction orientation.

The practical significance of the study lies in its utility for students, educators, and researchers working with Poe's poetry. By moving beyond surface-level thematic reading to analyse the linguistic texture of the verse, it enables readers to develop a more rigorous and reproducible appreciation of Poe's technical skill. Furthermore, the analytical template developed here—systematic multi-level stylistic analysis of a paired corpus of poems—is transferable to other poets within the Romantic and Gothic traditions, making the study's methodology itself a contribution to the field.

Limitations and Delimitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the interpretation of stylistic devices retains an element of subjectivity at the level of inferred emotional effect. While the identification and classification of linguistic features can be conducted with considerable objectivity, the mapping of those features onto reader responses involves assumptions about cognitive and affective processing that individual readers may not share uniformly. Second, the study is delimited to two poems, which allows analytical depth but limits the generalisability of findings to Poe's broader oeuvre. Third, the analysis is confined to the texts in their received written form; manuscript evidence that might illuminate the evolutionary history of Poe's stylistic choices lies outside the scope of the present investigation.

The study is deliberately delimited to the specific texts of "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead," analysed through a four-level framework—phonological, graphological, grammatical, and lexical-pragmatic—as defined within the scope of modern stylistic theory. This delimitation ensures analytical focus and methodological coherence without misrepresenting the breadth of Poe's stylistic range.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Stylistics

Stylistics is defined as the study of style in language, employing linguistic methodologies to

interpret literary texts. Crystal and Davy (1969) characterise it as the intersection of linguistics and literature, a discipline designed to analyse how language varies according to context, author, and historical period. Unlike traditional literary criticism, which may rely heavily on the critic's intuition and evaluative sensibility, stylistics aims for an accountable, evidence-based description of how a text achieves its effects (Simpson, 2004). The discipline's claim to objectivity rests on the principle that linguistic features can be identified and described with a precision unavailable to purely impressionistic criticism, even if the interpretation of those features' effects will always involve some degree of analytical judgement.

Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) situate the emergence of stylistics as a disciplinary project within the broader intellectual context of twentieth-century linguistics, noting that it arose partly as a corrective reaction against the subjectivity of early critical traditions. The formalist and structuralist movements in linguistics—particularly the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and, later, the Prague School—provided the conceptual vocabulary and analytical apparatus that stylisticians adapted for literary purposes. Roman Jakobson's (1960) foundational assertion that the poetic function of language involves a focus on the message for its own sake—the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination—remains a touchstone for phonological and structural analysis of poetry.

Stanley Fish (1981), one of stylistics' most persistent critics, argued that stylisticians fail to produce interpretations that are genuinely more objective than those of literary critics because the identification of stylistic features always already presupposes the interpretive framework that those features are supposed to produce. While Fish's critique has force, it has been largely absorbed rather than refuted by the discipline: contemporary stylistics, as practised by Leech and Short (2007) and others, does not claim to eliminate interpretation but to make it more explicit, reproducible, and grounded in textual evidence. This is the epistemological position adopted in the present study.

Levels of Stylistic Analysis

A comprehensive stylistic analysis operates across multiple levels of linguistic organisation. Ghafer and Sabir (2021) provide a useful synthesis of these levels as applied in stylistic practice, and their taxonomy—adapted here from the foundational work of Leech and Short (2007)—frames the analytical approach of the present study.

The phonological level is concerned with the sound patterns of the text, including rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and metre. This level is of paramount importance in poetry, where, as Jakobson (1960) argues, sound and sense are systematically related. Ofuya (2007) and Lodge (2009) provide the phonological frameworks drawn upon in this study, focusing on the sonic texture created by the interaction of consonantal and vocalic patterns. The graphological level, as theorised by Alabi (2007), involves the writing system's visual and orthographic dimensions: punctuation, capitalisation, line spacing, and the layout of text on the page. In literary texts, graphological choices carry semantic and stylistic implications that exceed their conventional orthographic function.

The grammatical level encompasses syntax, morphology, and the distribution of parts of speech. Choices between active and passive constructions, the deployment of modal auxiliaries, and the use of archaic or non-standard grammatical forms all contribute to the text's rhythm, its projection of speaker stance, and the reader's cognitive processing of propositional content. The lexical level examines word choice, or diction, in terms of its connotative and denotative dimensions, its register, its figurative deployments (metaphor, simile, personification), and the semantic fields that the vocabulary constructs. Finally, pragmatic analysis considers the contextual dimensions of meaning: what speakers imply beyond what they explicitly assert, how texts position readers, and how the illocutionary force of utterances shapes interpretive response (Sihite, 2019).

Foregrounding in Poetry

Central to stylistic theory, and of particular relevance to the analysis of poetry, is the concept

of foregrounding, which Leech and Short (2007) adapt from the Prague School of linguistics. Foregrounding refers to the mechanisms by which certain textual features are made salient against the background of linguistic or literary norms. Leech and Short distinguish between two principal types of foregrounding: parallelism, which involves the systematic repetition of structural patterns and thereby creates a heightened expectation of regularity; and deviation, which involves a departure from established norms—either the norms of standard language use or the internal norms established by the text itself—thereby creating a heightened expectation of significance. Poetry is, for Leech and Short (2007), essentially a genre of heightened foregrounding: it invites a slower, more recursive reading process in which deviations from ordinary linguistic use are experienced not as errors but as purposeful signals directing the reader toward particular interpretive conclusions. Achilov (2018) extends this account in a cross-linguistic context, demonstrating that foregrounding operates across typologically distinct languages, suggesting that the mechanisms identified by the Prague School are not parochially English-specific but reflect more general principles of communicative salience. In the present study, foregrounding—both parallelistic and deviational—serves as a meta-concept organising the analysis at each of the four analytical levels.

Previous Scholarship on Poe's Style

The body of scholarship on Poe's literary achievement is extensive, but studies focusing specifically on the linguistic mechanics of his poetry are proportionally fewer and merit careful review. Mora-Rioja (2023) examines the connection between Poe's poetry and metal music, identifying a high degree of musicality and lexical archaism as defining features of his verse. This musicality, Mora-Rioja argues, is a direct product of Poe's phonological choices—particularly his reliance on internal rhyme, trochaic rhythms, and the strategic clustering of sonorous consonants—and she traces its transmission into a very different artistic medium with considerable analytical precision.

Suparlan et al. (2019) conducted a stylistic analysis of "The Bells," concluding that metaphor and alliteration function as the dominant stylistic devices, deployed to create a cascading sound effect that formally mimics the poem's subject. Their finding that Poe treats sound as an integral component of semantic meaning—rather than a supplementary ornament—directly supports the analytical premises of the present study. Jameel and Lodhi (2023) analysed "Annabel Lee" at the lexical level, demonstrating how Poe's selection of adjectives and nouns constructs a sentimental tone that systematically reinforces the poem's narrative of irreparable loss.

Khalfan (2021) applied theme-rheme analysis to Poe's dream-themed poems, exploring the thematic structure of the verse and its construction of psychological interiority. While Khalfan's framework is drawn from systemic functional linguistics rather than the Leech and Short model, the findings are compatible with the present study's account of how Poe's grammatical choices project a specific speaker stance and organise the flow of information within the poem. Amir (2018) examined Poe's prose, specifically "The Tell-Tale Heart," demonstrating that rhetorical strategies including repetition, syntactic fragmentation, and shifts in modality are used to construct a portrait of psychological disintegration. Although this study concerns prose, its methodology and conclusions are directly pertinent to "Spirits of the Dead," a poem that similarly grapples with themes of psychological distress and the uncanny proximity of death.

Morisi (2005) offers a reading of the female figure in Poe's poetry that, while primarily concerned with gender and representation, attends carefully to the lexical choices through which Poe constructs his female subjects as objects of aesthetic idealisation. This is directly relevant to "To the River," in which the unnamed beloved is refracted through the imagery of the river and constructed entirely through the speaker's linguistic choices rather than granted any independent voice or subjectivity. Collectively, this body of scholarship confirms the analytical productivity of bringing linguistic frameworks to

bear on Poe's verse and identifies the specific levels—phonological, lexical, grammatical, pragmatic—at which the most significant stylistic work is done.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. As Creswell (2003) defines it, qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to understand a phenomenon within its natural context through the interpretive engagement of the researcher. In the present case, the phenomenon under investigation is Poe's stylistic practice, and the context is the specific textual environments of two selected poems. The design permits the close reading that stylistic analysis requires: an engagement with the text at the level of individual words, sounds, and punctuation marks, where every feature is treated as a potential carrier of meaning.

The study draws on the tradition of corpus-assisted stylistics insofar as both poems are treated as a small, purposively defined corpus. However, given the interpretive aims of the research and the limited size of the textual corpus, quantitative corpus methods are not employed; instead, qualitative close reading guided by a systematic multi-level framework is the primary analytical mode. This combination of systematic framework and interpretive close reading is consistent with what Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) describe as the methodological mainstream of contemporary stylistics.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework is grounded in the model of stylistic analysis proposed by Leech and Short (2007), which organises linguistic analysis into four key levels: phonology, graphology, grammar, and semantics/lexis. A fifth dimension—pragmatics—is incorporated to account for context, speaker intention, and the positioning of the reader. This five-level framework is not applied mechanically but is used as an organisational heuristic that ensures systematic coverage of the text's linguistic resources while remaining open to

emergent patterns and unexpected interactions between levels.

The phonological analysis draws on the work of Lodge (2009) and Ofuya (2007), focusing on the sonic texture produced by rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. The graphological analysis draws on Alabi (2007) and Leech (2014), examining the semantic and aesthetic implications of punctuation, lineation, and capitalisation. The grammatical analysis employs standard descriptive categories—parts of speech, clause types, verb phrase modality—supplemented by attention to foregrounding through archaic or non-standard usage, following the principles articulated by Leech and Short (2007). The lexical and pragmatic analysis draws on the broader traditions of figurative language analysis and speech act theory as applied in literary stylistics.

Data and Corpus

The primary data for this study consist of the complete texts of "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead" by Edgar Allan Poe. No human participants are involved; the poems are treated as self-contained textual artefacts. The versions employed are those standardly reproduced in authoritative scholarly editions of Poe's collected works. The two poems were selected because they represent complementary dimensions of Poe's poetic imagination—lyric Romanticism and Gothic mortality—while sharing the same meticulous formal craftsmanship, making comparison productive. Together they constitute a sufficient corpus for the depth of analysis the study aims to achieve, while remaining manageable enough for the level of granular attention that multi-level stylistic analysis demands.

Analytical Procedure

The data analysis follows a systematic, multi-stage process. The first stage involves repeated reading of both poems to gain a holistic understanding of their themes, dominant atmospheres, and general structural organisation before analytical attention is directed to individual features. The second stage involves segmentation: the poems are divided into their constituent stanzas and lines, which are then treated as discrete analytical units. The third stage

is the level-by-level analysis described above, during which instances of each type of stylistic feature are identified, described, and classified. At the phonological level, this involves the systematic identification of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme scheme; at the graphological level, the cataloguing of punctuation marks, capitalisation decisions, and lineation patterns; at the grammatical level, the classification of parts of speech and the analysis of clause and sentence structure; and at the lexical and pragmatic level, the identification of figurative language, semantic fields, and implied meaning. The fourth and final stage is synthesis: the findings from each level are integrated to produce an account of how the different levels of linguistic organisation interact to create Poe's distinctive poetic effects.

Data Analysis

Phonological Analysis

Phonology in poetry is concerned with the aesthetic organisation of sound. Poe famously prioritised the musicality of verse, and his theoretical writings—particularly "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and "The Poetic Principle" (1848)—explicitly theorise the relationship between sound patterns and the generation of melancholic beauty. The phonological analysis of "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead" confirms that this theoretical commitment is realised with extraordinary consistency at the level of the text.

Alliteration

Alliteration—the repetition of initial consonant sounds across proximate words—is employed in both poems to create emphasis, rhythm, and mood. In "To the River," the phrase "wandering water" deploys the bilabial approximant /w/ to mimic the fluid, gentle movement of the river itself. The phonological quality of the /w/ sound—voiced, continuous, fricative in quality—iconically enacts the subject's unbroken, undulating flow. The sibilant /s/ in "soul-searching" creates a hushed, introspective quality appropriate to the meditative tone of the poem; the voiceless fricative /s/ carries associations of restraint and interiority

that reinforce the speaker's posture of reverent reflection.

In "Spirits of the Dead," alliteration operates in a more percussive register. The /d/ in "dew-drop" provides a hard, grounding beat that anchors the poem's imagery in the concrete particularity of the natural world even as the broader semantic context gestures toward the supernatural. The soft fricative /ʃ/ of "shadowy" creates a hushed, eerie atmosphere wholly congruent with the poem's Gothic subject matter; the sound enacts the indistinctness it describes. Most strikingly, the phrase "mystery of mysteries" exploits the /m/ sound to create a murmuring, incantatory effect: the bilabial nasal, produced with closed lips, suggests the hushed, private character of revelation and contributes to the poem's rhetorical strategy of presenting death as a secret shared reluctantly with the living.

Jakobson's (1960) principle that the poetic function involves the projection of equivalence from the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic axis is directly illustrated by these alliterative patterns: the recurrence of initial sounds across the linear sequence of the poem creates an experience of formal expectation and satisfaction that shapes the reader's affective response to the semantic content. Suparlan et al.'s (2019) finding that alliteration dominates the sonic texture of Poe's "The Bells" is confirmed and extended here: in both "To the River" and "Spirits of the Dead," alliterative clustering is not a sporadic ornament but a systematic compositional strategy.

Assonance

Assonance—the repetition of vowel sounds within proximate words—contributes to internal rhyme and lyrical flow while also generating semantic resonances between the words that share a vowel. In "To the River," the juxtaposition of "heart" and "art" in proximate positions is particularly significant: the shared vowel sound /ɑ:/ creates a phonological coupling that formalises the poem's central thematic claim—that the speaker's romantic feeling and the aesthetic experience of the river are expressions of the same underlying reality. The /oo/ sounds in "glow" and "flow" similarly reinforce the imagery of continuous, luminous

movement; the rounded, open vowel enacts both the visual experience of the river's reflective surface and the sense of unimpeded temporal passage.

In "Spirits of the Dead," assonance operates with greater constriction and tension. The repetition of the short, close vowel /ɪ/ in "still" and "will," and again in "still" and "hill," produces a tight, constrained sound that formally mirrors the poem's central thematic preoccupation with stasis—the stillness of death, the immobility of the grave, the fixity of the past against which the living consciousness struggles. The high front vowel /i:/ in "clear," "fear," and "seem" introduces a shriller tonal quality that communicates tension and unease; this sonic register contrasts markedly with the deeper, rounder vowels of the river poem, producing an auditory distinction between the two poems that runs parallel to their thematic distinction.

Rhyme Scheme

The rhyme schemes of the two poems differ in ways that are thematically significant. "Spirits of the Dead" follows a tightly structured AABB couplet pattern in its opening stanzas, rhyming "alone/stone" and "secrecy/silence" in a way that lulls the reader into a state of rhythmic expectation. The predictability of this rhyme scheme operates as a form of parallelistic foregrounding: the reader's anticipation of the next rhyme creates a hypnotic quality that, paradoxically, makes the frightening imagery more rather than less disturbing—the form provides a false sense of security against which the semantic content of death and the supernatural registers with heightened force.

"To the River" employs a more varied ABACB scheme, which creates a subtler pattern of resolution and deferral. The rhymes "water/daughter" and "heart/art" are particularly productive semantically: the coupling of the river with the daughter figure (the beloved woman refracted through the river's imagery) formally enacts the poem's central metaphorical conceit, while "heart/art" collapses the distinction between emotion and aesthetic creation. The rhyme scheme thus performs a semantic function that

supplements and reinforces the lexical and figurative content of the verse.

Graphological Analysis

Graphology—the analysis of the visual and orthographic features of a text—is often undervalued in poetic analysis, but in Poe's verse, as in much nineteenth-century poetry, graphological choices are purposeful and semantically significant. Alabi (2007) argues that graphological features in literary texts carry implications that exceed their conventional orthographic functions, and the present analysis confirms this claim.

Punctuation

In "Spirits of the Dead," the semicolon in "tombstone; Not one" performs a precisely calibrated pause—more significant than a comma, less terminal than a full stop—that creates a hesitation or a suppressed breath entirely appropriate to the graveyard setting. The effect is of a speaker who pauses at a threshold, reluctant to complete the utterance, as if the completion of the thought would constitute too definitive an encounter with what lies beyond. The exclamation mark in "A mystery of mysteries!" functions as a jolt: it marks the poem's climactic revelation and disrupts the hushed, measured tone of the preceding lines, forcing the reader's attention to what the poem has been building toward throughout its progress.

The dash—a graphological feature particularly associated with the interrupted thought, the held breath, and the unresolved tension—appears in "loneliness—for" and in the compound "dew-drop" in "Spirits of the Dead." In the former case, it creates a fractured pause that mimics the disruption of the natural order by death; in the latter, it holds two words—and two semantic fields, the natural and the funereal—in a suspended, uneasy proximity. In "To the River," the exclamation mark in "Fair river!" marks an apostrophe: a direct address to an inanimate object that signals the speaker's emotional intensity and establishes the rhetorical posture of passionate engagement maintained throughout the poem.

Capitalisation and Lineation

The capitalisation of "Spirits" in the title and throughout "Spirits of the Dead" elevates the supernatural agents of the poem to the status of proper nouns—entities with ontological weight rather than mere figures of speech. This graphological choice formally enacts the poem's central claim: that the dead are not merely absent but present, not merely past but current. The capitalisation of key abstract nouns in both poems—"Beauty," "Truth," "Mystery"—follows a practice widespread in Romantic poetry and functions to grant abstract concepts a kind of material substantiality, elevating them from predicates to participants in the poem's enacted world.

The line breaks in both poems are managed with care. In "Spirits of the Dead," the relatively short lines and frequent enjambments create a sense of urgency and forward pressure: the meaning overflows the metrical unit, mimicking the inability to contain or control what the poem is addressing. In "To the River," the more regular correspondence between line endings and syntactic boundaries creates a sense of measured resolution that mirrors the river's steady flow. These graphological features—invisible in a paraphrase of the poems' content—are constitutive of their distinct emotional characters.

Grammatical Analysis

Grammar in poetry is frequently manipulated to achieve effects unavailable within the conventions of standard prose: archaic forms can create a sense of ritual solemnity, modal verbs can project a fatalistic worldview, and the distribution of parts of speech can construct the semantic field that determines the poem's imaginative universe.

Archaic Pronouns and Verb Forms

Both poems deploy the second-person singular pronoun system—"thou," "thee," "thy"—and the corresponding verb forms of Early Modern English. This is a deliberate foregrounding device in Leech and Short's (2007) sense: it constitutes a deviation from the norms of contemporary standard English that creates a marked stylistic effect. The archaism distances the text from

colloquial contemporary speech and situates it within a register associated with religious discourse, classical literature, and ritual address. In "To the River," where the speaker addresses the river directly, the use of the archaic second person reinforces the quasi-religious reverence with which the natural object is approached; in "Spirits of the Dead," where the speaker addresses the living soul confronting its own mortality, it imparts a solemnity appropriate to the gravity of the subject. The contraction "Thou'rt" (Thou art) in "To the River" additionally serves a metrical function, maintaining the syllable count while preserving the archaic flavour.

Modal Verbs and the Expression of Inevitability

The distribution of modal auxiliary verbs in "Spirits of the Dead" is particularly revealing. The modal "shall" in "Shall not look down" and "shall then o'ershadow thee" carries a deontic force—an expression of necessity or inevitability—that removes agency from the human subject and locates it in the abstract forces of death and fate. Unlike the epistemic modality of "will," which expresses probabilistic prediction, "shall" in its deontic usage expresses unconditional obligation or inevitability. The effect is to construct the poem's world as one in which human choice and desire are irrelevant: death does not negotiate, and its consequences cannot be averted. This grammatical choice thus performs the poem's thematic argument at the level of morphosyntax, not merely asserting the inevitability of death but grammatically enacting it.

Nominal and Adjectival Choices

The nominal lexis of "Spirits of the Dead" is heavily weighted toward abstract concepts—secrecy, solitude, mystery—and morbid concrete objects—tomb-stone, dew-drop, mist. This lexical clustering constructs a semantic field of enclosure, concealment, and decay that permeates the entire poem. The prevalence of abstract nouns reinforces the sense that the poem's world is one in which the normal categories of concrete experience have been dissolved or suspended; the morbid concrete objects function as uncanny intrusions of materiality into an otherwise ethereal discourse. In

"To the River," the adjectival profile is strikingly different: "bright," "clear," "fair," and "gentle" dominate, constructing a semantic field of luminosity, transparency, and tender movement. The contrast between the two poems' adjectival lexis is perhaps the most immediately perceptible index of their thematic opposition.

Lexical and Semantic Analysis

Metaphor and Personification

In "To the River," the poem's central metaphorical conceit equates the river with the beloved woman: the river becomes an emblem of beauty, of the "unhidden heart," and ultimately of the flow of time and memory through which the beloved is recalled. This metaphor is not introduced through an explicit comparison but is built cumulatively through the speaker's mode of address (the intimate "thou" and "thee"), the attributes predicated of the river (brightness, clarity, gentleness), and the manner in which the river's physical properties are made to correspond to the qualities of the beloved. The river is not simply compared to the woman; it becomes, through the progressive accumulation of metaphorical predications, her substitute presence in the poem's world—a way of holding her image without naming it.

Personification is deployed in both poems to blur the boundary between the human and the non-human. In "Spirits of the Dead," the attribution of human agency to the stars—"The stars shall not look down"—is particularly striking: it suggests that the cosmos itself is a witnessing presence, capable of observing and judging human experience. Denying the stars this capacity amounts to asserting that the dead person's situation is beyond even cosmic observation—a radical intensification of isolation. In "To the River," the river's apostrophic address is itself a form of personification: by speaking to the river as if it were a companion capable of understanding and responding, the speaker enacts the poem's central claim that the natural world and the human world are continuous, interpenetrating, and mutually expressive.

Repetition and Anaphora

In "Spirits of the Dead," the anaphoric construction "Now are thoughts thou shalt not banish, / Now are visions ne'er to vanish" creates a sense of relentless, oppressive accumulation through the repetition of the initial "Now." Anaphora is a classic parallelistic foregrounding device (Leech & Short, 2007): by repeating the same syntactic structure at the beginning of successive lines, it creates a rhythmic insistence that mirrors the obsessive, inescapable quality of the thoughts and visions the poem describes. The repetition of "shadowy—shadowy" similarly emphasises the pervasive, all-encompassing character of the poem's darkness; the word's reduplication enacts the experience of a darkness that is not merely present but everywhere, encircling, inescapable.

Pragmatic Analysis

Speaker Positioning and Tone

The pragmatic context of "To the River" involves a speaker who addresses the river as a therapeutic interlocutor—a substitute presence through which the speaker can manage and articulate feelings of love, loss, and longing that cannot be directly expressed to their human object. The tone is reverent and meditative, and the speech act is best characterised as a form of private apostrophe: an address to an absent or inanimate entity that functions less as communication than as a ritual of self-expression. The pragmatic implicature of the poem is a desire for connection and continuity—a wish that the beloved's image, preserved in the river's mirror, may remain accessible to the speaker across whatever distances of time and space separate them.

The pragmatic context of "Spirits of the Dead" is more complex and more confrontational. The speaker adopts a didactic posture—instructing the living how to respond to the proximity of the dead—before shifting to an ominous mode in which the consolations typically offered to the grieving are systematically withdrawn. The poem's central pragmatic move is to deny that death brings either peaceful solitude or complete obliteration; instead, it asserts that death brings a crowded, oppressive, inescapable presence. The

pragmatic implicature directed at the reader-as-mourner is that human hope, including the hope for rest and oblivion, is futile against the "mystery of mysteries" that death constitutes. This implicature, reinforced at every level of the poem's linguistic organisation, is what gives "Spirits of the Dead" its distinctively disquieting power.

Reader Positioning

Poe's stylistic choices in both poems construct a specific implied reader and position that reader in a determinate relationship to the poem's speaker and subject. In "Spirits of the Dead," the second-person address—"thee," "thy"—functions not merely as an archaic stylistic marker but as a direct interpellation of the reader, who is invited to occupy the position of the mourner or the person confronting their own mortality. The complex rhyme and sound patterns require active auditory engagement: Poe's verse demands to be heard as well as read, and the reader who submits to its sonic design experiences something closer to musical immersion than to ordinary silent reading. The dark imagery and insistent rhythms create an almost claustrophobic textual environment in which the reader's cognitive and affective responses are guided with unusual precision.

In "To the River," the reader occupies a different position: that of a sympathetic witness to the speaker's private meditation. The poem does not interpellate the reader directly but invites a form of readerly identification with the speaker's posture of reverent, melancholy adoration. The flowing rhythms and luminous imagery create a readerly experience of tender expansiveness that contrasts markedly with the constrained, pressured experience of reading "Spirits of the Dead." These two reader positions—the claustrophobic mourner and the sympathetic witness—are among the most important products of Poe's stylistic practice, and they are constructed at every level of linguistic organisation simultaneously.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive multi-level stylistic analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "To the

River" and "Spirits of the Dead," examining the two poems through phonological, graphological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic lenses. The analysis has confirmed, with substantial textual evidence, that Poe's reputation as a master of the rhythmic creation of beauty is well founded: his poetry is a meticulously constructed artefact in which every linguistic choice—from the selection of a phonological pattern to the deployment of a punctuation mark—serves the poem's overall aesthetic and thematic goals.

The phonological analysis demonstrated that Poe employs alliteration, assonance, and rhyme not as decorative ornaments but as semantically functional devices that iconically enact the subjects and themes they accompany. The fluid /w/ alliteration of "wandering water" enacts the river's movement; the constrained /i/ assonance of "still" and "will" enacts the stasis of death; the AABB couplet rhyme of "Spirits of the Dead" creates a hypnotic regularity against which the poem's disturbing semantic content registers with amplified force. Sound and sense are integrated with the systematic consistency that Poe's compositional theory demands.

The graphological analysis revealed that punctuation—semicolons, dashes, exclamation marks—is used to control the reader's breath, pace, and attention in ways that are integral to the poem's emotional effects rather than merely notational. The capitalisation of abstract nouns grants them ontological weight; the management of line endings governs the relationship between metrical expectation and syntactic resolution. These visual features of the text, often invisible in critical commentary focused on theme or image, are shown to be load-bearing elements of Poe's poetic architecture.

At the grammatical level, archaic pronoun forms and the strategic deployment of deontic modal auxiliaries construct a fatalistic, solemnly ritualistic worldview that is not merely asserted in the poems' semantic content but enacted through their morphosyntactic choices. The nominal and adjectival lexis of the two poems constructs contrasting semantic fields—luminosity and flow in "To the River," enclosure and decay in "Spirits of the Dead"—that are the most immediate index

of their distinct imaginative worlds. The figurative language—metaphor, personification, anaphora—integrates these lexical resources into patterns of meaning that exceed the sum of their individual components.

The pragmatic analysis demonstrated that these devices combine to construct distinct reader positions and distinct implied relationships between the speaker and the poem's addressee. The claustrophobic mourner of "Spirits of the Dead" and the sympathetic witness of "To the River" are constructed at every level of linguistic organisation simultaneously, confirming that Poe's poetic effects are genuinely multi-level achievements and not reducible to any single dimension of his craft.

The study affirms the value of stylistics as a tool for literary criticism, providing an empirical and reproducible basis for claims about poetic achievement that would otherwise rest on impressionistic assertion. It validates the analytical framework of Leech and Short (2007) as productive for nineteenth-century American poetry and demonstrates the analytical yield available from systematic multi-level analysis of a small, carefully selected corpus. Future research might extend this approach to Poe's short stories, testing whether the linguistic coherence documented here is a feature of his verse alone or a characteristic of his broader literary practice. Comparative stylistic analysis of Poe's poetry alongside the work of his Romantic contemporaries—Coleridge, Keats, Bryant—might further illuminate the extent to which the stylistic fingerprint identified here is distinctively Poe's or representative of a broader generic and period style.

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