

## A Tell-Tale Thriller: An Intertextual and Structural Insight into Poe's Pop

Marta Miquel-Baldellou  
(University of Lleida)

### Abstract

The year 2009 will be remembered for commemorating the bicentenary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth as well as the premature decease of the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. Despite some initial hesitance, more scholars have increasingly established links between Poe and contemporary musicians like Lou Reed, Allan Parsons Project, as well as Bob Dylan (Rollason 2009), which implies the increasing blurring among different artistic manifestations and the gradual dismantling of high and popular culture. More recently, some scholars have added Michael Jackson to the list, especially with regard to the pop singer's choice of Vincent Price, the actor who appeared in most of Roger Corman's films based on Poe's tales, to participate in his *Thriller*. Likewise, academics often acknowledge that, ten years ago, an article published in *The Hollywood Reporter* announced Jackson would play the role of Edgar Allan Poe in a big-budget biopic entitled *The Nightmares of Edgar Allan Poe*, a project which was never released (Neimeyer 2002; Peeples 2004). Actually, both Poe and Jackson share important biographical details such as the pervasive influence of a tragic childhood, a tempestuous relationship with their respective fathers, their ludicrous depiction by the press, their assumed eccentricity and popularity as American icons, their misunderstood marriages, their financial debts, and even their untimely death. As far as their reception is concerned, even though they both were American, Poe was ultimately rediscovered by Charles Baudelaire, who prompted Poe's popularity in Europe, and similarly, Michael Jackson had planned to end his career through a series of concerts to be held exclusively in London.

Nonetheless, it is precisely a narratological approach into Michael Jackson's lyrics and videoclips that gives evidence of closely intertwined links with some of Poe's tales as far as characters, settings, themes, and motives are concerned. Settings such as dark backstreets, menacing passages, dilapidated houses, graves, and mental journeys through time and outer space pervade many of Poe's tales and Jackson's videoclips. Moreover, characters such as strong-willed women, smooth criminals, doppelgangers, men in the crowd, and jokers are commonly found in both Jackson's songs and Poe's tales. They also share themes such as the role of the individual in society, the inner struggle between two separate factions, their antipathy for the press, the role of the artist and his art, capitalism, crime, illegitimate relations, and even race (Kennedy and Weissberg 2001). Motives such as physical transformations, cats, ravens, pavements resembling games of chess, mourning bands, hoaxes, as well as Egyptian tokens also pervade their works. In particular, close-readings of Poe's tales and Jackson's songs show the parallelism that can be established between "Murders in the rue Morgue" and "Smooth criminal", "The imp of the perverse" and "Bad", "William Wilson" and "Man in the mirror", "The Man in the crowd" and "Stranger in Moscow", "The assignation" and "Billie Jean", "The Man that was used up" and "Don't stop 'till you have enough", "The masque of the Red Death" and "Thriller", "The fall of the House of Usher" and "Another part of me", as well as "Ligeia" and "Dirty Diana".

Edgar Allan Poe's contemporary popularity remains unquestioned as last year's celebrations and commemorations of his bicentenary corroborate. Likewise, even though many assume Michael Jackson's fame had lately declined, he has been heralded as the unquestionable king of pop and entertainment. It is the aim of this paper to present an intertextual analysis between Edgar Allan Poe's tales and Michael Jackson's songs and videoclips with a view to

underlining the narratological structures shared between both authors' works as representatives of contemporary popular culture. This approach may aid in teaching narratological tools and structural analysis as well as encouraging students to develop comparative and intertextual analyses among authors and works pertaining to different disciplines

### **1. Poe and Jackson: A Case of Unexpected Intertextuality**

The year 2009 will be remembered for commemorating the bicentenary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth as well as the premature decease of the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. Despite some initial hesitance, scholars have increasingly established links between Poe and contemporary musicians like Lou Reed, Allan Parsons Project as well as Bob Dylan (Neimeyer 2002; Peeples 2004; Rollason 2009), thus underlining the increasing blurring among different artistic manifestations and the gradual dismantling of high and popular culture that characterises postmodern literary approaches (Klages 2006). More recently, Michael Jackson seems to have been added to this list (Sullivan 2009), especially taking into consideration the late American singer's choice of Vincent Price, the actor starring in most of Roger Corman's films based on Poe's tales, to participate in his globally acclaimed song "Thriller", performing a memorable gothic and even sardonic rap.

Michael Jackson's fondness of the Bostonian writer went further than that of an avid reader as he even considered the possibility of playing the role of Edgar Allan Poe in a film. In the year 1999, the cinema-industry journal *The Hollywood Reporter* announced Jackson would play the role of Edgar Allan Poe in a big-budget biopic entitled *The Nightmares of Edgar Allan Poe* (BBC News 1999); a project which was ultimately never released. In this respect, Mark Neimeyer mentioned "plans are underway for a new Poe movie starring Michael Jackson" (2002: 219), and likewise, Scott Peeples slightly commented on "Michael Jackson's ambition of playing Poe" (2004: 125). Neimeyer further noticed that the script of the film revolved around characters from Poe's works coming back to haunt him during the last days of his life, thus intermingling biography and fiction in what appeared to be a highly popular cultural construct. However, it was precisely Michael Jackson himself, in an audio chat held with fans to promote his album *Invincible* (2001), that made explicit reference to this project as well as stated his views on the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. A brief extract of the transcript from this chat session reads as follows:

*Chat leader:* I understand you're also doing *The Nightmares of Edgar Allan Poe*. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

*Michael Jackson:* Yes. That one's coming up. It's about the great prolific American writer Edgar Allan Poe.

*Chat leader:* Kind of scary guy himself too...

*Michael Jackson:* Yes, very diabolical and very dark, but he was a genius, and his own personal life is very interesting and I read about, you know, what he had to go through to create his ingenious work. It's a great story. (Jackson 2005)

Michael Jackson's words thus corroborate that not only did he know Edgar Allan Poe, but he was interested in his life and works, and even considered the possibility of impersonating the Bostonian writer and American icon in the cinema at some stage in his life.

## **2. Parallel Figures: Life, Poetics and Heritage**

Michael Jackson's acknowledged interest in Edgar Allan Poe also seems to respond to striking similarities established between both icons of American popular culture in terms of their life, conception of art, and even the reception of their works. Both Poe and Jackson share important biographical details such as the pervasive influence of a tragic childhood, a tempestuous relationship with their respective fathers, a ludicrous depiction by the press, their assumed eccentricity and popularity as American icons, their misunderstood marriages, their troubles with alcohol and narcotics, their financial debts, and even their untimely death.

In terms of their art, Poe was well aware of his poetics as he displayed his craft in the essay "The philosophy of composition" (1846), establishing the consideration of *an effect* to create in each of his compositions so that all details would be aimed at attaining that pre-established effect. Nonetheless, it was in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842) that Poe revealed himself as an actual mesmeriser, theorising about the tale and its unity of impression, claiming that "during the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (Van Doren 1986: 566). Poe's concern about the effect created in his tales as well as the will to hold the readers' attention under his command through his creative craft are reminiscent of popular-music scholar Susan Fast's recent comments about Michael Jackson's capacity to hold the public's attention by means of his music, thus arguing: "[t]he sounds he could make with his voice and the movements he could call up out of his body were like those of no one else, but *this* part of his difference, while incomprehensible, was embraceable. It was magic" (2010: 259-60). Similarly, in the course of Michael Jackson's Memorial held at Staples Center, Los Angeles, soon after the American singer's demise in 2009, Berry Gordy, Founder of Motown Records, commented on the way he felt when he saw

Michael Jackson's performance for the television special programme *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever* (1983), thus confessing: “[f]rom the first beat of ‘Billie Jean’ and the toss of that hat, I was mesmerised. But when he did his iconic moonwalk, I was shocked. It was magic”(2010: 259-60). In both cases, it seems that the effect attained on the mesmerised public responded to a carefully pre-established design which was mainly characterised by technical perfection.

Poe gave account of his poetics soon after composing his eponymous poem “The raven” (1845), enumerating the different items he took into consideration to write it such as the attainment of a particular effect, the length, the tone, the province and the choice of a repetitive refrain. Likewise, critic Dominic Fox, a contributor to the volume *The Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson* (2009), states that, when Jackson performed on stage, emotional seriousness was held in abeyance by invention through a series of elements such as lightness, speed, and infinitesimally precise timing (Rosser 2010: 1). The unity of effect attained in both cases was thus ultimately pre-established through arduous application and craft, involving the total mesmerising of the reader or the viewer.

As for their critical heritage and reception, even if both were American in origin, their characteristic and outstanding differences as creators defied geographical barriers as well as clearly-cut assigned nationalities. Poe was born in Boston, even though he spent a significant period of his life in Virginia, as a result of which he has also been considered a Southern writer. Despite his American origins, Poe was nevertheless born to an English mother and an Irish father, and having been adopted by John Allan, a Scottish tobacco trader, he spent five years of his childhood in England and Scotland. His European background and education, as well as his somehow dissolute behaviour and his blatant ingenuity, often rendered him an outcast in his own nation. In this respect, Rosenheim and Rachman argued that “Poe has served as a crucial and much celebrated literary model for generations of writers and readers. In the country of his birth, however, Poe can hardly be said to be at home” (1995: ix). Hence, there has been much concern as to what extent Edgar Allan Poe could be considered an obvious representative of the American nation at the time, even if now he is definitely regarded as one of the most outstanding writers in American literary studies, and indisputably, he is part of the canon.

In relation to Michael Jackson, even if born in Gary, Indiana, his stratospheric popularity was bound to defy any kind of physical boundaries in the era of globalisation. Nonetheless, issues of race have often become a source for concern in his case. No matter how many times he repeated he was proud of being an African-American in an interview held

with Oprah Winfrey in 1993, the gradual and blatant discoloration of his skin, due to the so-called vitiligo disease, as he often claimed, was to render him in an awkward position in as far as identity and racial issues are concerned. Moreover, even if both creators were American, Poe was fairly widely read in England during his lifetime, especially after the publication of his poem “The raven” (1845), and as a result of Charles Baudelaire’s translations of Poe’s works into French, the European legacy of the American writer still remains undeniable. Likewise, during his lifetime, Michael Jackson was claimed to spend some periods in England and in Ireland to rest, and shortly before his death, he had even planned to end his career through a series of concerts to be held exclusively in London.

Both creators were thus highly acclaimed but also despised in their own nations, often as a result of social misunderstanding due to their own eccentricities and outstanding ingenuity on equal terms. Poe became a reputed editor, literary critic and tale-teller, but he mostly acquired fame through the publication of his renowned poem “The raven” (1845). Similarly, Michael Jackson had also been fairly popular since his early childhood, when he sang and danced with his brothers in their family band The Jackson 5, and yet, his fame reached its peak with the release of the best ever selling album, *Thriller*, in 1982. Despite their undeniable popularity, both also had to bear traumatic episodes in their professional lives. Even if hired as a reputed editor in important journals of the time such as *Burton’s Gentlemen’s Magazine* or *Graham’s Magazine*, Poe was also often debunked due to his incorrigible behaviour when he was inebriated, as a result of which he was dismissed from different periodicals. In this respect, Poe’s own editor, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, significantly contributed to stigmatising his status, as shown in an obituary note he published in the *New York Daily Tribute* soon after Poe’s demise:

Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, *but few will be grieved by it*. The poet was well-known personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England, and in several states of Continental Europe; *but he had few or no friends* and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art lost one of its most brilliant, but erratic stars.

(Griswold 1986: 294)

Obviously, Griswold’s moral reprisal seemed to respond to Poe’s dubious habits, regardless of the Bostonian writer’s undeniable talent. Nonetheless, Griswold would be in charge of editing Poe’s works posthumously, thus becoming one of Poe’s first editors in history. Likewise, despite being inarguably proclaimed as King of Pop, Michael Jackson also

faced public exposure and stigmatisation from 1993 onwards, when he was accused of child molestation, even though he was finally acquitted on all accounts. Poe's dismal relation with his editor Griswold somehow bears a close resemblance to the fairly recently continuous disagreements between Michael Jackson and Sony Music Chairman, Tommy Mottola. Apparently, Michael Jackson accused Mottola of failing to promote his album *Invincible* (2001) as well as organising a boycott against him and some other African-American musicians. Nevertheless, after the American pop singer's recent passing away, Mottola as head of Sony Music, is still entitled to the rights of Michael Jackson's recordings, just as Griswold became executor of Poe's works.

Nonetheless, the legacy and heritage both Edgar Allan Poe and Michael Jackson have produced is simply immeasurable, extending even beyond the domains of literature and music, respectively. With regard to Poe, in his volume tellingly entitled *Poe's Seductive Influence on Great Writers*, Burton R. Pollin claimed that "since his death in October 1849, Edgar Allan Poe has exercised a lasting effect upon the works of European and American writers of fiction and poetry" (2004: ix). Likewise, in Michael Jackson's Memorial – broadcast worldwide in 2009 soon after the American singer's demise– an outpouring array of celebrities and young singers paid their tribute to the American icon. However, it was Berry Gordy, Founder of Motown Records, that simply described Michael Jackson as "the greatest entertainer ever", especially referring back to his extraordinary television appearance in *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever* (1983), when Michael Jackson performed "Billie Jean" for the first time.

### **3. Antecedents: An Insight into Applied Cultural and Structural Studies**

In 2009, the year of Poe's bicentennial, many scholarly events and conferences paid homage to the Bostonian writer, offering new approaches and reinterpretations of his canonical works. Within the framework of postmodernism and cultural studies, research on Poe and his influence on popular culture has particularly proliferated lately. Interdisciplinary approaches that focus on Poe and other artistic manifestations such as painting, cinema or music, to name just a few, have also been encouraged in recent studies and publications (Rollason 2010). Likewise, soon after Michael Jackson passed away, scholarly attention has been especially shifted to the late American pop singer, engaging in issues such as constructions of subjectivity through music with a focus on gender, sexuality, disability and

race. Interdisciplinary approaches to his music are also being promoted through topics comprising narratives of desire, engagement with world politics, intergenerational relationships, the spectacular body in performance, illness and its impact on music, the fantastic, as well as challenges to hegemonic constructions of race, masculinity, sexuality and gender (Fast 2009). Nonetheless, despite these cultural and sociological approaches, few studies focused on Michael Jackson have significantly explored his video clips and song lyrics as textualities and objects of literary analysis, that is, as actual narratives. In the advent of interdisciplinary studies within popular culture, a comparative analysis of the narratological components of Edgar Allan Poe's tales and Michael Jackson's songs would definitely bring to the floor remarkable intertextual links.

Even if Michael Jackson's songs and lyrics have not been studied as actual textualities, and therefore, no narratological approach has been devised yet in relation to the American singer, conversely, Poe's tales have profusely been studied from a structural and narratological perspective in addition to many other literary theoretical backgrounds that range from psychoanalysis to postmodernism and cultural studies. However, thorough structural and comparative studies about Poe have recently been published in Spain as illustrated by Francisco Javier Castillo's article "Espacios, ambientes y personajes poeianos" (1991), Margarita Rigal Aragón's volume entitled *Aspectos estructurales y temáticos recurrentes en la narrativa breve de Edgar Allan Poe* (1998), Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan's publication under the title of *Presencia de Edgar Allan Poe en la literatura española del siglo XIX* (1999), and even more recently, María de los Ángeles González Miguel's book on *E.T.A. Hoffmann y Edgar Allan Poe: Estudio comparativo de su narrativa breve* (2000). According to Klages, structuralist studies become relevant and remain still perused because, like science, they reduce "complex systems to their most fundamental parts" (2006: 32). Hence, by means of decoding the ultimate structures and elements of a text, structuralist and narratological studies encourage comparative analyses, bringing together different texts and authors and promoting interdisciplinary studies, which are considered especially relevant in contemporary approaches to Poe's works.

#### **4. Of Words and Images: A Comparative Narratological Analysis**

A narratological approach into Michael Jackson's lyrics and short films provides remarkable evidence of closely intertwined links regarding themes, characters, settings and

motives that have been thoroughly studied and analysed in relation to Poe's tales. They share thematic links such as the role of the individual in society, the inner struggle between two separate factions, their complaints about the press, the role of the artist and his art, capitalism, crime, illegitimate relations, and even race. Characters such as strong-willed women, smooth criminals, doppelgangers, men in the crowd, and jokers are also commonly found in both their songs and tales. Settings such as dark backstreets, menacing passages, dilapidated houses, graveyards, and mental journeys through time and outer space pervade many of Poe's tales as well as Jackson's video clips, and finally, motives such as physical transformations, cats, ravens, pavements resembling chess boards, mourning bands, hoaxes, as well as Egyptian tokens are also recurrent in the works of both American icons of popular culture. A narratological approach which examines the universe of both Edgar Allan Poe and Michael Jackson may thus focus on the analysis of a series of features which are often present in structural studies such as intertextual thematic links, actants or characters that populate both tales and lyrics, common settings, shared time frameworks as well as motifs that become frequent all through the stories and songs that delineate the object of this analysis.

#### **4.1 Intertextual Thematic Links**

Through the past two centuries, many critics have contributed different classifications of Poe's tales according to their different subject matters. Van Doren (1986) divided Poe's texts into tales of fantasy, terror, death, revenge and murder, and mystery and ratiocination. Magistrale (2001) examined Poe's tales as divided into three thematic sections, mainly vampiric love stories; tales of psychological terror, homicide, and revenge; and stories which eventually gave rise to the detective tale. Likewise, Fisher (2008) outlined several common thematic frameworks which recurred in Poe's tales such as the urban, the medical-scientific, the psychological, and the existentialist-modernist context. Even more recently, Hayes (2009) established an autobiographical sketch of Poe's tales identifying several patterns and motifs which shaped Poe's universe focusing on the gothic woman, the detective, the flâneur, the recluse in a manor house and the tormented writer.

A comparative approach to the universe of both masters of popular culture underlines outstanding thematic intertextual links and discourses which compile most of the subject matters that have been explored in relation to Poe up to now, as well as adding some more which arise as a result of this comparative analysis, which are mainly: i.- capitalism and

consumerism, ii.- escapism and dissoluteness, iii.- hoaxes and humorous pieces, iv.- romance and unrequited love, v.- crime and investigation, vi.- fights and revenge, vii.- metaphysical speculations, viii.- the interaction between the individual and society, ix.- gothic textualities, x.- the role of the press and social anger, xi.- science and technology, and xii.- the discourse of race.

#### 4.1.1 Capitalism and Consumerism

In some of his songs, Michael Jackson made explicit and implicit references to his contemporary American economic context. Songs from his album *Off the Wall* (1979) such as “Don’t stop till you get enough” and “Working day and night” underline a significant capitalistic discourse which compels the individual to worship consumerism and indulge in making profit for one’s own benefit, while becoming a victim and a slave of the same economic system the individual helps to create. Similarly, the song “Wanna be starting something”, included in his album *Thriller* (1982), underlines the ethics of self-help and raw entrepreneurship which characterises capitalism and trade, making reference to the social and economic context held under a powerful Republican administration during the early eighties. In that respect, Rosser (2010) states that Jackson became the most perfect expression of Reaganomics and the neo-liberal speculative economy. More recently, his song “Money”, included in his album *HIStory* (1995), rebuked the prominent role money plays in contemporary society, having acquired the status of a new religion and bringing about social hypocrisy and meanness, as the lyrics show:

If you show me the cash  
Then I will take it  
If you tell me to cry  
Then I will fake it  
If you give me a hand  
Then I will shake it  
You’ll do anything for money  
 (“Money”; Jackson 1997: 66)

In clear analogy with this discourse, with the advent of capitalism in nineteenth-century America, Poe also examined the dehumanisation of the individual as a result of economic and social pressures in the tale “The man that was used up” (1840); a satirical piece which underlines the literal deconstruction of one of the most remarkable men of the age, Captain

Smith, a magnificent and rich general who worships fame and appearances, but is nevertheless a mere bundle of soft tissue as the narrator ultimately finds out. Likewise, Poe also witnessed the gold fever that characterised the first half of the nineteenth century, as his tale “The gold bug” (1843) portrays, featuring a cryptographer, William Legrand, who eventually becomes a treasure hunter, obsessed with interpreting the codes contained in a bug and achieving wealth as a result. Similarly, in 1849, Poe also published his short story “Von Kempelen and his discovery”, inspired by the Gold Rush in California, as a clear satire of the human lust for gold, which depicts the arrest of an American chemist, Von Kempelen, who has managed to transmute lead into gold through the ideas of the English chemist and physicist Sir Humphry Davy.

#### 4.1.2 Escapism and Dissoluteness

Michael Jackson’s first album with producer Quincy Jones, *Off the Wall* (1979), paved the ground for a future transition between rhythm-and-blues and pop, owing a great debt to the disco music of the seventies which basically underlined a discourse of escapism about enjoying life and forgetting any sort of existential worries. Songs such as “Get on the floor”, “Off the wall” and “Burn this disco out”, a clear legacy of pieces composed with The Jacksons as a group, explore the necessity to take pleasure in life and lead a carefree existence, thus indulging in mesmerising rhythms that induce the individual to surrender and take part in pleasurable trances or reveries.

Going back in time, Poe remembered his youth in England in his tale “William Wilson” (1840), a paradigmatic example of a split-personality case featuring a young narrator, fond of gambling and drinking, who is perpetually haunted by his double when he is about to indulge in committing bad deeds. This young narrator gradually becomes a victim unable to release himself from the temptation of gambling and leading a dissolute life, in clear analogy with the lyrics of songs such as “Off the wall”, inviting the listener to indulge in pleasure and forget about responsibilities, as the following lines unveil:

So tonight gotta leave that nine to five upon the shelf  
 And just enjoy yourself  
 Groove, let the madness in the music get to you  
 Life ain’t bad at all  
 If you live it off the wall  
 (“Off the wall”; Jackson 1997: 67)

The nocturnal pleasures found in Jackson's song are also coupled by the narrator's dissolute habits in Poe's tale while he stays in the boarding-house and meets his rival William Wilson:

We met at a late hour of the night; for our debaucheries were to be faithfully protracted until morning. The wine flowed freely, and there were not wanting other and perhaps more dangerous seductions; so that the grey dawn had already faintly appeared in the east, while our delirious extravagance was at its height. (Van Doren 1986: 71)

Despite this apparent enjoyment, the narrator's otherness will inevitably make its appearance, thus foreshadowing guilt and regret as a result of his inhibitions being set free. When the narrator beholds his antagonist, Wilson, and resolves to kill him, he gains insight into the indissoluble quality of his two sides. Likewise, this latent sense of guilt is also made explicit in the lyrics of Jackson's song "Off the wall", underlining the dual nature of the individual, stating "gotta hide your inhibitions / gotta let that fool loose deep inside your soul / want to see an exhibition / better do it now before you get too old" (Jackson 1997: 67). As Poe's "William Wilson" has traditionally been considered a classic tale illustrating the figure of the double or the doppelganger, Jackson's lyrics in this particular song also involve the belief that an urge for enjoyment and craziness lies dormant behind an apparently grave countenance, thus acknowledging the double side of human nature.

#### **4.1.3 Hoaxes and Humorous Pieces**

Sarcasm and irony also came hand in hand in many of Michael Jackson's songs and even short films often related to love and romance as is the case with "Girlfriend", "The Girl is mine", "Say, say, say", and "Liberian girl". "Girlfriend", included in the album *Off the Wall* (1979), presents a naughty young man teasing a girl and claiming he intends to inform her boyfriend that they had been dating each other behind his back. In "The girl is mine", a duet with Paul McCartney, both singers become rivals to gain the love of the same woman, indulging in day-dreaming, each of them stating that the girl would choose him instead of his rival. Similarly, in the video clip *Say, say, say*, included in Paul McCartney's album *Pipes of Peace* (1983), both singers belong to a group of conmen who sell invigorating beverages that apparently give strength to the weakest men. Nonetheless, these deceitful partners are ultimately kind-hearted as it is admitted they give the poor children in an orphanage the

money they gain by means of dubious endeavours. Moreover, the video clip *Liberian girl*, from the album *Bad* (1987), features many celebrities who presumably had been asked to play a role in one of Michael Jackson's short films. Nonetheless, to their astonishment, at the end of the film, they realise Jackson himself had been shooting everything while they were waiting for him to make his stellar appearance, and thus, the whole event has been devised as an actual hoax.

The sarcastic lyrics and plots of these songs and short films are strongly reminiscent of some of Poe's most highly acclaimed sarcastic pieces such as "Three Sundays in a week" (1841), presenting a young suitor whose wit manages to mislead his future father-in-law and thus win his daughter's favours. Similarly, in "Why the little Frenchman wears his hand in a sling" (1840), two men court the same woman sitting on an armchair to find out they are actually holding their own hands instead of those of the pretended widow. Poe's "The balloon-hoax" (1844), a forerunner of science-fiction, even led his readership to inquire whether the actual journey had really taken place, even though it was completely invented. Finally, Poe's irreverent tale "The premature burial" (1844) is also meant to be a hoax as, after enumerating several cases of people who had been buried while still alive, the narrator undergoes the same tragic experience to find out later he had just been dreaming.

A similarly sarcastic and ironic tone can be detected in instances taken from Jackson's song "The girl is mine" and Poe's tale "Why the little Frenchman wears his hand in a sling". A hilarious rivalry between both pretenders unfolds in both texts resulting in understated verbal fights. In Jackson's song, this competition between rivals becomes explicit when they exchange the following spoken lines:

*Michael*

Well, after loving me, she said  
She couldn't love another

*Paul*

Is that what she said?

*Michael*

Yes, she said it, you keep dreaming  
(*"The girl is mine"*; Jackson 1997: 29)

This dialogue bears a close resemblance with Poe's tale when the narrator, Sir Patrick O'Grandison, infatuated with Miss Tracle, finds out that a Frenchman is also in love with her, and thus despondently states he "tould me, among a bushel o' lies, bad luck to him, that he was mad for the love o' my widdy Misthress Tracle, and that my widdy Mrs.Tracle had a puncheon for *him*" (Poe 1982: 518). Written in dialect, Sir Patrick O'Grandison's reflections,

despite his evident grief and resentment, often become hilarious and thus contribute to shaping one of Poe's most sarcastic tales.

#### 4.1.4 Romance and Unrequited Love

From *Off the Wall* (1979) to his album *Invincible* (2001), many song lyrics portray romantic relationships with women from a different perspective. Some of them are fairly lyrical in their approach and resent the end of a romance, as is the case with "She's out of my life" (*Off the Wall*, 1979) or "Remember the time" (*Dangerous*, 1991), while others like "It's the falling in love" (*Off the Wall*, 1979) or "I just can't stop loving you" (*Bad*, 1987) merely celebrate the experience of romantic affection. Nonetheless, most of Michael Jackson's love songs can be divided into two main categories according to the different prototypes of women they present. Songs like "The lady in my life" (*Thriller*, 1982), "Baby be mine" (*Thriller*, 1982), "I just can't stop loving you" (*Bad*, 1987) and "Liberian lirl" (*Bad*, 1987) refer to a pure and even ideal love, where the lady in question stands as a clear legacy of the Victorian angel of the house. In clear opposition to these texts, songs such as "The way you make me feel" (*Bad*, 1987), "Dirty Diana" (*Bad*, 1987), "In the closet" (*Dangerous*, 1991), "Dangerous" (*Dangerous*, 1991) or "Heartbreaker" (*Invincible*, 2001) give account of the ordeal the poetic persona is undergoing due to a lover's wickedness and impiety, in clear analogy with the Victorian prototype of the fallen woman.

Poe's tales featuring women, also known as his *marriage* tales, also seem to follow a very similar pattern due to metempsychosis whereby submissive wives become enraged females and vice versa. In this respect, male mourners witness the transformation from angel to fallen woman of characters such as Morella, Ligeia, Berenice, Madeline, and the lady in "The oval portrait". Striking parallelisms can be established between the way the grieving narrator feels in the presence of Morella and the tension the female protagonist of Jackson's "Dangerous" creates in the singer; the unlimited ambition of Ligeia and that of "Dirty Diana"; and the secret and presumably sinful love portrayed in Jackson's "In the closet" and the mysterious bond established between Roderick and Madeline in Poe's "The fall of the House of Usher". As a case in point, the narrator in Poe's tale "Morella" feels entrapped as he falls under her charm saying "I felt a forbidden spirit enkindling within me –would Morella place her cold hand upon my own (Poe 1982: 667). Similarly, in Jackson's song "Dangerous", the

singer tries to evade, to no avail, the inescapable attraction a deceitful girl exerts upon him, thus whispering:

She came at me in sections  
With the eyes of desire  
I felt trapped into her web of sin  
A touch, a kiss, a whisper of love  
I was at the point of no return  
("Dangerous"; Jackson 1997: 17)

In both cases, the female protagonists seem to typify evil and monstrosity, challenging and ultimately defying the weakening male in a display of attraction and repulsion.

#### **4.1.5 Crime and Investigation**

Some of Michael Jackson's songs also portray illegal deeds and lawsuits, featuring criminals, social outcasts, and dubious characters whose behaviour may be subjected to moral reprobation and even legal prosecution. "Billie Jean" (*Thriller*, 1982) gives account of a lawsuit in which the main character, a modern dandy, is brought to court to prove he is the father of a beauty queen's son. Most of the lyrics from these songs are somehow related to the hard-boiled detective genre with outstanding examples such as the noir video clip *Smooth Criminal* (*Bad*, 1987), the Latino *Blood is on the Dance Floor* (*Blood is on the Dance Floor*, 1997) and the colourful *You Rock My World* (*Invincible*, 2001), whereby the clearly-cut characterisation of criminals and detectives is subverted to the extent it is hard to tell the difference between these two archetypes as they both belong to the underworld. This particular tendency is strongly reminiscent of Poe's extraordinarily-gifted detective Dupin, whose aristocratic origins are somehow subverted by his ludicrous nocturnal habits and his mysterious aura which almost renders him preternatural.

In this respect, scenes from the video clip *Billie Jean* (*Thriller*, 1982) bear a close resemblance to Poe's "The Murders in the rue Morgue" (1841). The singer walking on the pavement, which illuminates after every step he takes, is strongly remindful of the first scenes in Poe's detective tale, whereby Dupin and his friend take a walk along the streets of Paris. As a result of Dupin's observing his friend looking at the pavement, he is able to trace back his friend's thread of thought despite the fact that he remained silent all through their walk. Moreover, the moment when the singer goes upstairs to meet Billie and becomes invisible to escape the detective that is in his pursuit seems to be in clear analogy with the puzzle Dupin

and his friend must face so as to account for the criminal's unbelievable way to flee after having murdered Madame L'Esplanade and her daughter in a guesthouse.

Similarly, the criminal investigation taking place in Jackson's song "Smooth criminal" (*Bad*, 1987) and the careful analysis of the evidence left in the scene of the crime are also somehow remindful of the gruesome details reported in newspapers about the murders committed in Poe's detective tale. The first lines of "Smooth criminal" give account of Annie's murder as follows:

As he came into the window  
It was the sound of a crescendo  
He came into her apartment  
He left the bloodstains on the carpet  
She ran underneath the table  
He could see she was unable  
So she ran into the bedroom  
She was struck down, it was her doom  
(“Smooth criminal”; Jackson 1997: 82)

The reconstruction of Annie's murder in Jackson's song bears many points in common with the report of the murders Dupin reads in newspapers:

The apartment was in the wildest disorder –the furniture broken and thrown about in all directions. There was only one bedstead; and from this the bed had been removed, and thrown into the middle of the floor. On a chair lay a razor, besmeared with blood.  
(Poe 1982: 147)

Later on, Dupin would discover that the actual criminal, an orangutan, climbed to Madame L'Esplanade's room and broke into her apartment through the window.

#### **4.1.6 Fights and Revenge**

Songs like "Beat it" (*Thriller*, 1982) or "Bad" (*Bad*, 1987) delineate stories in which two factions must solve their differences, usually starting with a fight which ends up in a dance. Evil in human nature and the desire to avenge one's wrong is also widely explored in some of Poe's tales such as "Metzengerstein" (1832), "The tell-tale heart" (1843), "The imp of the perverse" (1845), or "The cask of Amontillado" (1846), the latter being proclaimed as one of Poe's most outstanding tales of revenge. Even fifty years after committing a crime, Montresor still feels the need to voice the murder of his antagonist, Fortunato. Even though the reasons why Montresor decided to immure his rival alive are never explicitly stated, an

ancestral enmity seems to have turned them into enemies for life. As Montresor admits at the beginning of his confession, “the thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (Poe 1982: 274). The deprecating tone Montresor uses all through the way to the catacombs, where he is leading Fortunato to taste his Amontillado, is also perused in Jackson’s songs “Beat it” (*Thriller*, 1982) and “Bad” (*Bad*, 1987). The sarcastic speech Montresor uses so as to snare Fortunato is illustrated in “Beat it” through the poetic persona’s threatening remarks, stating: “you have to show them that you’re really not scared / you’re playin’ with your life, this ain’t no truth or dare” (Jackson 1997: 6). Similarly, some particular lines in Jackson’s song “Bad” seem especially reminiscent of Montresor’s speech: “the world is out / you’re doin’ wrong / gonna lock you up / before too long” (Jackson 1997: 5). In both cases, a darkly ironic tone hides the criminal’s ultimate intentions in relation to the unfortunate victim.

In addition to portraying fights as narratives of revenge, these textualities go beyond so as to explore the evil side of human nature. In Jackson’s song “Dangerous” (*Dangerous*, 1991), the poetic persona finds himself confessing at some stage his inability to deny what is presumed to be wicked, confessing “her inner spirit’s as sharp / as a two-edged sword / but I loved it / ‘cause it’s dangerous” (Jackson 1997: 17). This haunting need to release rage and evil also seemed to have pursued Poe not only in his writings but also in his personal life. This is precisely what is explored in Poe’s “The imp of the perverse” (1845), as the narrator unfolds his thoughts about the individual’s self-destructiveness and the avoidance of moral responsibility, but also the unconscious desire to be caught so as to be ultimately redeemed.

#### **4.1.7 Metaphysical Speculations**

Towards the end of his career, Jackson became especially concerned about the preservation of the environment, as well as his religious faith, his commitment to the welfare of humanity, and even his reflections on the afterlife. Some songs illustrating these issues are the deeply-reflective “Man in the mirror” (*Bad*, 1987), the gospel-like “Will you be there?” (*Dangerous*, 1991), the resilient “Keep the faith” (*Dangerous*, 1991), the deeply-committed “Heal the world” (*Dangerous*, 1991), the lyrical “Gone too soon” (*Dangerous*, 1991), the dramatic “Earth song” (*HIStory*, 1995), the mystic “Speechless” (*Invincible*, 2001), and the mournful “Heaven can wait” (*Invincible*, 2001). Poe’s concern about metaphysics and psychology also became a latent concern in pieces such as “The conversation of Eiros and

Charmion" (1839), "William Wilson" (1840), "The colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841), and "The power of words" (1845), whereby celestial beings engage in conversation about the meaning of creation and coming-into-being.

All these textualities seem to have in common a necessary destruction so as to be born again. Poe's series of metaphysical tales, which were inaugurated with the publication of "The conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (1839), reflected the apocalyptic visions that obsessed many Americans at the time. In 1835, due to the appearance of Halley's comet, fears about the end of the world became common and it was believed the Earth would eventually be consumed in a fiery ball. This apocalyptic vision is also illustrated in Jackson's "Earth song" (*HIStory*, 1995), including a litany of questions necessarily addressed to the listener, acknowledging the destruction of the planet as a result of man's endeavours. In "Gone too soon" (*Dangerous*, 1991), the poetic persona gains insight into the afterlife and the inevitability of death and disappearance, which bears significant resemblance with Poe's metaphysical pieces, thus claiming

Like a comet  
Blazing 'cross the evening sky  
Gone too soon  
Like a rainbow  
Fading in the twinkling of an eye  
Gone too soon  
("Gone Too Soon": Jackson 1997: 33)

However, in addition to the change that inevitably ensues by the end of earthly existence, Jackson's song "Man in the mirror" (*Bad*, 1987) rather seems to beg for an inward transformation, at a more personal level, a transcendental change. At the end of Poe's tale "William Wilson", the narrator finds out that the antagonist that kept pursuing him when he was to commit a bad deed was simply himself. Similarly, in Jackson's "Man in the mirror", the poetic persona confesses "I've been a victim of / a selfish kind of love / it's time that I realize" (1997: 60), thus unveiling an epiphanic moment by means of which he has gained insight into his own conscience and has started to live a new kind of life.

#### **4.1.8 The Interaction between the Individual and Society**

The struggle of the individual against the social context and the consequent devaluation of his innocence is explored in some of Jackson's songs like "A stranger in Moscow"

(*HIStory*, 1995), in which a passer-by walks along the cold streets of the Russian metropolis surrounded by a crowd of people; or “Human nature” (*Thriller*, 1982), whereby the individual undergoes a transcendental experience while staring at the city at his feet. Likewise, Poe also examined the interaction between the individual and the different social classes in his well-known tale “The Man of the crowd” (1840). These textualities have in common the fact that these narrators feel constantly surrounded by crowds, and yet they still feel isolated and profoundly lonely. The narrator in Poe’s “The Man of the crowd” observes an old man at a distance that avoids being alone, and hides behind the crowd of citizens that populate the great metropolis of London. Poe’s tale thus explores the isolation of the artist and the alienation of the individual in an urban environment. Jackson’s video clip *Stranger in Moscow* is thus fairly reminiscent of Poe’s tale as the singer walks along the streets of a city, and passes by a crowd of pedestrians that seem to ignore his presence.

In Poe’s tale, the narrator feels both fascinated and awed by the old man, as he feels the unavoidable need to follow him along the streets of London. However, he eventually confronts him and stares at his face, and yet, the stranger ignores him and resumes his walk. This exchange of glances, between the poetic persona and the old stranger, as well as the need to observe and feel observed, is also portrayed in Jackson’s introspective song “Human nature” (*Thriller*, 1982), whereby the singer takes a walk along the city’s streets, as he finds himself “reaching out / to touch a stranger / electric eyes are everywhere” (1997: 38). A similar scene is described in his song “Stranger in Moscow” (*HIStory*, 1995), in which the poetic persona wanders around the cold streets of Moscow, dejected and lonely, stating “I was wandering in the rain / mask of life, feelin’ insane” (1997: 81). Both songs thus point at instances of concealment and exposure, as the poetic persona indulges in a desirable aloofness but also feels the need to have the crowd around.

#### **4.1.9. Gothic Textualities**

Some of Jackson’s songs also deal with gothic and horror themes explicitly as is the case with the short films *Thriller* (*Thriller*, 1982) and *Ghosts* (*Blood is on the Dance Floor*, 1997), as a clear homage to classic examples within the horror genre, among them obviously, Edgar Allan Poe. In the case of the short film *Thriller*, directed by John Landis, who had recently released the film *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), visual references to Roger Corman’s films based on Poe’s tales are made explicit when Michael Jackson and his

girlfriend leave the theatre. While they are having an argument about the film they were watching and are standing at the theatre gate, the viewer may catch a glimpse of the advertising poster of Roger Corman's film *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), featuring the actor Vincent Price, who also significantly contributes a rap in Jackson's song. Nonetheless, the lyrics of "Thriller" are also remindful of Poe's tale "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), as the singer teases his girlfriend and tries to scare her claiming "night creatures call / and the dead start to walk in their masquerade" (89). At some stage in Landis' short film *Thriller*, the pop singer manages to exert dominion over the crowd of living dead closing them in through his music and mesmerising movements, in clear analogy with Poe's Prospero and the masquerade taking place in his secluded palazzo. In this respect, popular music critics such as Christopher Lynch have argued that "Jackson's performance is like a carnival, with Jackson as the clown inviting the audience to his utopian world" (2001: 117).

This dance is also echoed in Stan Winston's short film *Ghosts* (1997), in which villagers from town, led by their mayor, urge Maestro, a strange man with magic powers living in isolation, to leave the town immediately. Maestro's display of magic powers through music and dance charms the villagers, who easily fall under his magic spell. Moreover, the first scenes in *Ghosts* show a majestic raven, in clear reference to Poe's poem, as the crowd approach Maestro's haunted house; a scene which is also strongly reminiscent of the first scenes in many of Corman's films based on Poe's tales in which the hero approaches the villain's house, which is always far removed from civilisation.

#### **4.1.10 The Role of the Press and Social Anger**

As an individual constantly chased by the press, some of Jackson's song lyrics examine personal dilemmas about being exposed to the public gaze and struggling to keep his privacy and personal space. Songs such as "Leave me alone" from the film *Moonwalker* (1988), "Tabloid junkie" (*HIStory*, 1995), "Unbreakable" (*Invincible*, 2001) or "Invincible" (*Invincible*, 2001) complain about these issues. As a writer as well as an editor of different journals, Poe also wrote several pieces which were interpreted as instances of harsh criticism about the sensationalism that characterised some of the most popular journals at the time. In tales such as "A predicament" (1838) and "How to write a *Blackwood* article" (1838), Poe mocked the ludicrous sensationalism and horror that characterised the writings published in magazines such as *Blackwood*. In "A predicament", the female protagonist, Signora Psyche

Zenobia, is compelled to experience shocking sensations so as to learn how to write a *Blackwood* article. At some stage, Zenobia and her friend Pompei climb to the steeple of a church to behold the city of Edinburgh. So as to satisfy her curiosity, Zenobia stands on Pompei's shoulders and thrusts her head in the opening of the gigantic clock so as to look down at the city. Suddenly, Zenobia feels a cold pressure at the back of her head, realising, as a result of her exaggerated curiosity, the gigantic hand of the church clock is about to behead her.

Zenobia's precarious situation as a result of her curiosity as well as her subservience to the *Blackwood* press seems to be echoed in the equally sharp images presented in Jackson's song "Tabloid junkie" (*HIStory*, 1995), when the poetic persona openly addresses tabloids stating "it's slander / you say it's not a sword / but with your pen you torture men" (1997: 83), and likewise, he considers himself a victim claiming "in the black / they stab me in the back" (1997: 83). Poe may have indulged in self-parody when writing these tales, as he harshly criticised the type of journals in which some of his tales had been published. Similarly, Michael Jackson may have felt insurmountable anguish as he struggled to acquire and retain fame while feeling the desperate need to relinquish it when tabloids insisted on damaging his public image.

Likewise, Jackson also complained about the dehumanisation of society in songs such as "Jam" (*Dangerous*, 1991), "They don't really care about us" (*HIStory*, 1995) and "Scream" (*HIStory*, 1995), referring to social outcasts and focusing on the increasing alienation of the individual in society. As a case in point, the lyrics in "Jam" (*Dangerous*, 1991) read as follows:

I told my brother  
 Don't you ask me for no favors  
 I'm conditioned by the system  
 Don't you talk to me  
 Don't scream and shout  
 ("Jam"; Jackson 1997: 47)

Poe also explored the submission to a hierarchy and its ironic reversal in pieces such as "The system of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845), in which the narrator visiting a lunatic asylum eventually discovers the doctors are really the insane patients, and the dehumanisation of the individual within a corrupt system of power in "Hop frog" (1849), whereby the King's fool seeks revenge enchainning the monarch and his aristocratic followers, thus reversing a traditionally-assumed hierarchy.

#### 4.1.11 Science and Technology

Jackson's fondness for technology, gadgets and innovating scientific breakthroughs, especially as far as futuristic journeys are concerned, also shows in some of his video clips such as *Speed Demon* (*Bad*, 1987) and *Scream* (*HIStory*, 1995) which bear some parallelisms with Poe's own attachment to science fiction in short pieces such as "The balloon-hoax" (1844), "Mellonta Tauta" (1849), or even his metaphysical and scientific volume on astronomy *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe* (1848). Poe's "The balloon-hoax" was conceived as an attempt to convince newspapers readers that a balloon flight across the Atlantic Ocean had been completed in seventy-five hours. Its technical and detailed description provided readers with convincing details that the journey had actually taken place. Poe could boast he managed to convince a large number of people, especially due to the high interest in manned balloon flights most citizens had, regarding them as a scientific and technological marvel of the time.

In this respect, Michael Jackson's own dance movements have often been described as robotic and even defying the laws of physics, especially recalling his steps in songs such as "Dancing machine" (1973), which he used to perform with The Jackson 5. Moreover, his spatial and shining outfits used in his *HIStory* Tour, his transformation into cars or even robots in his film *Moonwalker*, the way he was propelled into the air at the beginning of each concert, as well as his iconic moonwalk give evidence of Jackson's fondness for technological gadgets. His self-image as an actual cyborg began to take shape in his song "Speed demon" (*Bad*, 1987), whereby a traveller riding a motorbike is thrilled by the velocity he is achieving, asserting

Speedin' on the freeway  
 Gotta get a leadway  
 Doin' it on the highway  
 Gotta have it my way  
 Mind is like a compass  
 I'm stoppin' at nothin'  
 ("Speed Demon"; Jackson 1997: 80)

Even though the lyrics in "Scream" rather refer to social injustice in the world, the actions taking place in its video clip are set in outer space, whereby the protagonists live in a spaceship, which looks like a comfortable mansion far removed from Earth. *Scream* seems to foretell life in the future at the same time it underlines the unconscious desire to escape life on Earth. As a forerunner of science fiction, Poe also set his tale "Mellonta Tauta" (1849) in the

year 2848, and while providing an interesting satire of his own era, it also foretold some important inferences about the future.

#### 4.1.12 The Discourse of Race

Having lived in Virginia for a significant period of his life, Poe possessed an insightful knowledge about the situation African-American people underwent during his time, when slavery was still considered a legal institution. African-American characters named Pompei and Jupiter play a minor role in his tales “A predicament” (1838) and “The gold-bug” (1843), respectively. Likewise, critics such as Leland S. Person (2001) have recently re-interpreted some Poe’s tales like “Ligeia” (1845), “The murders in the rue Morgue” (1841), “The black cat” (1843) and “Hop-Frog” (1849) as texts illustrating the vengeance of blackness focusing on Ligeia’s penetrating black eyes, the passionate orangutan’s release of his rage, Pluto’s vengeance over the narrator’s wife’s murder, and Hop-Frog’s fighting back ancestral racism when chaining together courtly aristocrats. Nonetheless, it is probably Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), which mostly underlines the racist colonial ideology and racialist scientific knowledge structure prevailing in his time.

Conversely, being an African-American by birth, but lately presenting a remarkable pale complexion, Jackson had to face harsh criticism and accusations of bleaching his skin. As a result of this public affront, he wrote the song “Black or White” (*Dangerous*, 1991), underlining the meaningless traditionally-established racial differences in the era of globalisation and multiculturalism, thus arguing in the rap of the song

See, it’s not about races just places, faces  
Where your blood comes from  
Is where your space is  
I’ve seen the bright get duller  
I’m not going to spend my life being a color  
 (“Black or White”; Jackson 1997: 9)

Jackson’s video clip *Black or White*, directed by John Landis, reinforces the message disseminated in the song lyrics, as the singer travels around the world and dances with people from different nationalities until, through spectacular *morphing* special effects, faces of people from different races rapidly transmute into one another.

## 4.2 Parallel Actants or Characters

In addition to these thematic links, the works of both creators share other significant narratological features in terms of actants or characters. With regard to actants, Michael Jackson's songs and video clips portray different typologies of characters which recur in all his albums, mainly: the dandy and the detective in "Billie Jean" (*Thriller*, 1982); the gangster in "Smooth criminal" (*Bad*, 1987) and "You rock my world" (*Invincible*, 2001); the conman or gambler in "Say, say, say" (McCartney, *Pipes of Peace*, 1983); the backstreet man in songs such as "Bad" (*Bad*, 1987) or "The way you make me feel" (*Bad*, 1987); the social outcast in "They Ddn't really care about us" (*HIStory*, 1995); the man of the crowd in "Stranger in Moscow" (*HIStory*, 1995); the doppelganger in "Man in the mirror" (*Bad*, 1987); the avenger in "Beat it" (*Thriller*, 1982) and the street fighter in "Bad" (*Bad*, 1987); the angel of the house in "Liberian girl" (*Bad*, 1987), and the fallen woman in "Dirty Diana" (*Bad*, 1987) or "In the closet" (*Dangerous*, 1991); the cranky-and-isolated loner of the manor house in the short film *Ghosts* (*Blood is on the Dance Floor*, 1997); the monster or transformer in the video clip *Thriller* (*Thriller*, 1982); the social commentator in "Tabloid junkie" (*HIStory*, 1995), and the spaceman in the video clip *Scream* (*HIStory*, 1995) or the short film *Captain Eo* (1986).

Interestingly enough, most of these characters also populate Poe's tales as is the case with his detective trilogy featuring Auguste Dupin as a dandy as well as a detective; the gambling character and doppelganger in "William Wilson" (1840); the social outcast of "The man of the crowd" (1840); the enraged avenger in "The cask of Amontillado" (1846) or "Hop-Frog" (1849); angels of the house such as Eleonora and Rowena and fallen women such as Ligeia and Morella; the loner and isolated Prospero in "The masque of the red death" (1842) or Roderick in "The fall of the House of Usher" (1839); the journalist in tales such as "How to write a *Blackwood* article" (1838), and adventurers or technicians in such pieces as "The balloon-hoax" (1844) or "Mellonta Tauta" (1849).

## 4.3 Common Settings

With regard to settings, the storyline of Michael Jackson's song lyrics takes place in either imaginary or actual settings. Backstreets on the outskirts of a city become a particularly recurrent setting with Poeian men of the crowd walking along alienating streets in songs such as "A stranger in Moscow" (*HIStory*, 1995), "Human nature" (*Thriller*, 1982) and "The way

you make me feel” (*Bad*, 1987). Isolated and enclosed settings crowded with gangs such as garages in tales of revenge like “Beat it” (*Thriller*, 1982) or “Bad” (*Bad*, 1987) are also reminiscent of Poe’s cellars in “The cask of Amontillado” (1846). Some other characters undergo a prison term as in Jackson’s video clip *They Don’t Really Care About Us* (*HIStory*, 1995), while the terrified narrator in Poe’s “The pit and the pendulum” (1843) accurately describes his anguished feelings in his gothic enclosure as a convict. Some scenes of the video clip *Billie Jean* (*Thriller*, 1982), before the dandy-singer meets Billie, take place at a hotel which bears a close resemblance to the guesthouse where Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter are killed in Poe’s tale “Murders in the rue Morgue” (1841), especially at the moment the singer goes up the stairs to get into Billie’s bedroom.

Isolated manor houses and gothic castles also recur in Poe’s short fiction as is the case with the ancient House of Usher and Prospero’s palazzo in “The masque of the red death” (1842). Some of Michael Jackson’s explicitly gothic video clips, as is the case with *Thriller* (*Thriller*, 1982) and *Ghosts* (*Blood is on the Dance Floor*, 1997), are set in dilapidated houses where the victims are either entrapped or an eccentric recluse spends his days in complete isolation. Stages or even television sets are also commonly found in Michael Jackson’s video clips like *Dirty Diana* (*Bad*, 1987) or *Liberian Girl* (*Bad*, 1987); in the former, women play tricks on men, hiding away in glamorous limousines while the singer is performing on stage, and in the latter, spectators observe an array of celebrities waiting impatiently to have an audition and soon realise they have been deceived as the video clip was meant to be a hoax. As another case in point, in Poe’s sarcastic tale “The spectacles” (1844), it is actually in a theatre that Simpson meets the deceitful, but alluring Madame Lalande with whom he will fall madly in love to find out later she is a hideous old woman who has deceived him on purpose.

In addition to these realistic settings, some scenarios in both Jackson’s songs and Poe’s tales are imaginary, portraying an either utopian or dystopian setting as is the case with the video clips *Leave Me Alone* (*Bad*, 1987) and *Black or White* (*Dangerous*, 1991), which portray Jackson’s particular inner universe and yearning for cultural diversity. Similarly, *Earth Song* (*HIStory*, 1995) depicts Planet Earth after a cataclysm has ensued, while the short film *Captain Eo* (1986) and the video clip *Scream* (*HIStory*, 1995) are set in outer space. All these songs, video clips and short films seem to echo imaginary and utopian settings in Poe’s tales such as “Landor’s Cottage” (1849) or metaphysical scenarios as is the case with “The colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841), artificial settings such as in “The sphinx” (1846) or futuristic settings in “Mellonta Tauta” (1849).

#### 4.4 Shared Time Frameworks

In relation to time frameworks, most of Michael Jackson's song lyrics portray contemporary, classical or futuristic actions. Most of the storylines depicted in his songs are presumed to be contemporary. Nonetheless, some of his video clips disrupt this tendency, setting the actions in ancient Egypt as is the case with *Remember the Time* (*Dangerous*, 1991), the 1920s in Chicago in *Smooth Criminal* (*Bad*, 1987), the nostalgic 1950s in the first scenes of *Thriller* (*Thriller*, 1982), the psychedelic 1970s in discotheques in *Rock With You* (*Off the Wall*, 1979), and even the future in *Scream* (*HIStory*, 1995) and short film *Captain Eo* (1986).

As for Poe's tales and the time frameworks established in them, even though most of the tales take place either in an undetermined time framework or are contemporary of Poe's century, some tales go back to classical times or possess classical reminiscences as is the case with "The assignation" (1834) and "The conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (1839). Likewise, "Some words with a mummy" (1845) examines the encounter between a mummy from ancient Egypt and contemporary scientists while exchanging information about these two different periods of time. Poe also set some of his tales in a futuristic world explicitly, as is the case with "Mellonta Tauta" (1849) set in the year 2848, and as a forerunner of science fiction, he also gave account of numerous artefacts and revolutionary machines which were ahead of his time in tales such as "The balloon-hoax" (1844) or "Von Kempelen and his discovery" (1849).

#### 4.5 Recurrent Motifs

Both creators' popularity led to identify their art with several motifs or clichés which have pervaded all through time. Poe's tales feature characteristic tokens such as oval portraits and clocks, ravens and black cats, pavements in the city of Paris, tell-tale hearts, and men in black with a mournful look. Likewise, Michael Jackson's universe of lyrics and short films also feature characteristic tokens that have become recurrent through time such as mourning bands –reminiscent of Poe's widowers–, crucial pictures to unravel the puzzle in "Billie Jean" (*Thriller*, 1982), animals such as tigers and panthers in the video clips *Billie Jean* (*Thriller*, 1982) and *Black or White* (*Dangerous*, 1991), hats and gloves in *Smooth Criminal* (*Bad*, 1987) as characteristic of the gangster, paving stones that denote the messianic powers of

mind of the passer-by in *Billie Jean* (*Thriller*, 1982), and anguished sighs preceding the tune of “Smooth criminal” (*Bad*, 1987). All these motifs seem to mirror Poe’s tales “Ligeia” (1838) and its mournful widower, “The oval portrait” (1842) and the crucial transformation of the young lady in her life-like picture, “The black cat” (1843) and Pluto’s unremitting presence, “The murders in the rue Morgue” (1841) and the transcendental significance Dupin attaches to the pavement, as well as “The tell-tale heart” (1843) and the old man’s spine-chilling sighs of terror before meeting his end.

Just like Poe perfected his craft as a writer and carefully reflected on his poetics, disseminating these motifs all through his tales, Michael Jackson also seemed to create and evolve through time amalgamating all these tokens to create a living intertextual body or palimpsest, as Will Straw (1988) argues, wearing shining white gloves and socks as a reminder of the dandy in *Billie Jean* (*Thriller*, 1982), hats and mourning bands to play the role of the gangster in *Smooth Criminal* (*Bad*, 1987), outfits with metal belts and chains to impersonate the backstreet man in *Beat it* (*Thriller*, 1982) and *Bad* (*Bad*, 1987), and military suits and jackets in *HIStory* (*HIStory*, 1995).

#### 4.6 Functions and Discourse Modalities

In terms of the poetic persona in Michael Jackson’s songs, most of the lyrics present a first-person narrator, who is even homodiegetic, in the sense he also plays an important role in the storyline in addition to narrating the actions taking place. Nonetheless, in some cases, the narrator becomes omniscient, heterodiegetic, narrating events in which he seems to play no role except that of observer. In Jackson’s song “Smooth criminal” (*Bad*, 1987), the poetic persona merely gives an accurate account of the evidence found in a crime scene. Likewise, Poe’s tales also feature a narrator who is crucially involved in the actions taking place, even if a few tales feature an omniscient narrator, as is the case of “The balloon-hoax” (1844), which is meant to be an accurate account of a journey.

Drawing on Roman Jakobson’s functions of language, Jackson’s songs and Poe’s tales also exemplify standard functions which can be termed as referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic, as far as they give prominence to the context, the addresser, the addressee, contact, code or message. Jackson’s songs such as “Smooth criminal” (*Bad*, 1987) give emphasis to the referential context, and so their tone is fairly realistic and accurate. Some other song lyrics focus on the addresser and the way he feels, thus fulfilling the emotive

function, as is the case with “She’s out of my life” (*Off the Wall*, 1979), in which the poetic persona dramatically unfolds his dejected sentiments as a result of unrequited love. Conversely, songs such as “Beat it” (*Thriller*, 1982) and “Bad” (*Bad*, 1987), and even “Baby be mine” (*Thriller*, 1982), in a very different way, explicitly make reference to the addressee, thus exemplifying the conative function, as the poetic persona tries to exert some persuasive influence over the listener. The phatic function which underlines contact may be illustrated in songs such as “Jam” (*Dangerous*, 1991), “They don’t really care about us” (*HIStory*, 1995) and “Scream” (*HIStory*, 1995) through electrifying rhythms that hold the listener’s attention. Some other songs may be described as metalingual, as they focus on the code itself, as is the case with the classic song “Music and me”, which Jackson sang with The Jackson 5. Finally, some of Jackson’s songs exemplify the poetic function as they mainly concentrate on the message they disseminate, as happens with “Heal the world” (*Dangerous*, 1991) and “Speechless” (*Invincible*, 2001).

Similarly, Poe’s tales also provide explicit instances of these narrative functions. Some of them are mainly referential as they explicitly refer to a contextual reality, as is the case with “The mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), which made explicit reference to the actual murder of a young woman in New York during Poe’s time. Some others particularly focus on the addresser, and thus become particularly emotive, as is the case with the tormented narrators in “The tell-tale heart” (1843) or “The pit and the pendulum” (1843). Conversely, Poe’s tale “The cask of Amontillado” is in desperate need to confess his bad deed, and thus needs the addressee to hear his confession, thus placing emphasis on the conative function. Demented narrators also fulfil the phatic function as illustrated in Poe’s “The imp of the perverse” (1845). Nonetheless, Poe was also well aware of his craft as a writer and journalist and thus explicitly addresses the code and its intricacies in tales such as “How to write a *Blackwood* Article” (1838). Finally, some of Poe’s tales are especially suitable to illustrate the poetic function as they place emphasis on the lyrical message itself as is the case with “The assignation” (1834) or “The oval portrait” (1842).

These narrative functions necessarily condition the tone displayed in Poe’s tales and Jackson’s songs, which comprises graveness and seriousness in “Morella” (1835) and “She’s out of my life” (*Off the Wall*, 1979), humour and wit in “Three Sundays in a week” (1841) and “The girl is mine” (*Thriller*, 1982), anger and revenge in “The cask of Amontillado” (1846) and “Bad” (*Bad*, 1987), persuasiveness and argumentation in “The imp of the perverse” (1845) and “Jam” (*Dangerous*, 1991), careful analysis and realistic description in

“The murders in the rue Morgue” (1841) and “Smooth criminal” (*Bad*, 1987), and outstanding lyricism in “The oval portrait” (1842) and “Speechless” (*Invincible*, 2001).

## 5 Afterthought

All things considered, this intertextual analysis between Edgar Allan Poe’s tales and Michael Jackson’s songs, video clips and short films underlines the narratological structures shared between both authors’ works as representatives of contemporary popular culture. In terms of life, poetics and heritage, these two iconic masters seem to present many points in common. Nonetheless, a comparative structural approach between the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Michael Jackson has shown striking similarities which range from thematic links to discourse modalities.

Narratological items often explored in literary structural analyses such as themes, actants, settings, time frameworks, motifs and discourse modalities may thus prove useful so as to enact comparative studies between works and creators pertaining to different disciplines. This comparative narratological analysis could also be expanded through applied studies of concrete songs and tales. In particular, close readings of Poe’s tales and Jackson’s songs show the parallelisms that can be established between “Murders in the rue Morgue” and “Smooth criminal”, “The imp of the perverse” and “Bad”, “William Wilson” and “Man in the mirror”, “The man in the crowd” and “Stranger in Moscow”, “The assination” and “Billie Jean”, “The man that was used up” and “Don’t stop ‘till you have enough”, “The masque of the red death” and “Thriller”, “The fall of the House of Usher” and “Another part of me”, as well as “Ligeia” and “Dirty Diana”. All in all, this comparative approach may aid in teaching narratological tools and structural analyses as well as encouraging students and scholars to develop comparative, intertextual and interdisciplinary studies.

## References

- BBC NEWS. 1999. “Jackson’s big screen thriller”. *BBC Online Network*.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/514069.stm>.
- CASTILLO, F.J. 1991. “Espacios, ambientes y personajes poeianos”. *Revista de filología de la Universidad de La Laguna*, 10, 51-67.

- FAST, S. 2009. "Popular music and society: Call for papers. Special issue: Michael Jackson: musical subjectivities". *Musicology/Matters*.  
<http://musicologymatters.blogspot.com/2009/10/mj-cfp.html>.
- FAST, S. 2010. "Difference that exceeded understanding: Remembering Michael Jackson (1958-2009)". *Popular Music and Society*, 33(2), 259-266.
- FISHER, B.F. 2008. *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FISHER, P. (ed.) 2009. *The Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson*. Winchester: O Books.
- GONZÁLEZ MIGUEL, M.A. 2000. *E.T.A. Hoffmann y Edgar Allan Poe: Estudio comparativo de su narrativa breve*. Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid.
- GRISWOLD, R.W. 1986 (1849). "Death of Edgar Allan Poe", *New York Daily Tribune*. In I.M.WALKER (ed.), *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 294-302.
- HAYES, K.J. 2009. *Edgar Allan Poe*. London: Reaktion Books.
- JACKSON, M. 1979. *Off the Wall*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 1982. *Thriller*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 1987. *Bad*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 1991. *Dangerous*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 1995. *HIStory: Past, Present and Future*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 1997. *Blood is on the Dance Floor*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 1997. *The Complete Michael Jackson*. London: Faber Music.
- JACKSON, M. 2001. *Invincible*. New York: Epic Records.
- JACKSON, M. 2005. "Audio chat VH1 fans of *Invincible*". *MJJ Polish Board*. Powered by ASP-FastBoard. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V\\_-x0IFCIHE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_-x0IFCIHE).
- KLAGES, M. 2006. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.
- LYNCH, C. 2001. "Ritual transformation through Michael Jackson's music video". *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 25, 114-131.
- MAGISTRALE, T. 2001. *Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Westport and London: Greenwood.
- NEIMEYER, M. 2002. "Poe and Popular Culture". In K.J. HAYES (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 205-224.
- PEEPLES, S. 2004. *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Camden House.

- PERSON, L.S. 2001. "Poe's Philosophy of Amalgamation". In J.G. KENNEDY and L. WEISSBERG (eds.), *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 205-224.
- POE, E.A. 1982. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Penguin.
- POLLIN, B.R. 2004. *Poe's Seductive Influence on Great Writers*. Lincoln: iUniverse.
- RIGAL ARAGÓN, M. 1998. *Aspectos estructurales y temáticos recurrentes en la narrativa breve de Edgar Allan Poe*. Castilla La Mancha: Universidad de Castilla La Mancha.
- RODRÍGUEZ GUERRERO-STRACHAN, S. 1999. *Presencia de Edgar Allan Poe en la Literatura Española del Siglo XIX*. Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid.
- ROLLASON, C. 2009. "Tell-Tale Signs – Edgar Allan Poe and Bob Dylan: Towards a model of intertextuality". *Atlantis*, 31(2), 41-56.
- ROLLASON, C. 2010. "The Poe bicentennial year 2009 in Spain". *The European English Messenger*, 19(2), 50-55.
- ROSENHEIM, S. and S. RACHMAN 1995. *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ROSSER, P. 2010. "Review of *The Resistible Demise of Michael Jackson*, edited by Mark Fisher". *The Journal of Music*. <http://journalofmusic.com/article/1146>.
- STRAW, W. 1988. "Music video in its contexts: Popular music and post-modernism in the 1980s". *Popular Music*, 7(3), 247-266.
- SULLIVAN, M. 2009. "Thriller, nevermore: Michael Jackson's tell-tale obsession with Edgar Allan Poe". *Pop Matters*. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/107644-thriller-nevermore/>.
- VAN DOREN STERN, P. (ed.) 1986. *The Portable Poe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.