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Most critics of "The Bells" dissect the poem in light of its allegorical and onomatopoeic qualities. By dismissing coexistent alternative interpretations, they ignore Poe's complex artistic vision. The common argument states that "The Bells" is a simple allegory of human development. For example, Davidson equates each of the four stanzas with a successive life stage, defining them respectively as youth, love, maturity and old age. Critics generally acknowledge that one theme in "The Bells" is progression toward death. Davidson claims, in fact, that the tolling bells are "concrete representations" of death.[1] Differing, Williams sees death as an ironic and unifying theme. According to him Poe saw life, even when in bliss, as doomed because existence itself reminds man "that discord and death alone are triumphant." In contrast, for Fletcher the poem has no meaning, nor does it project "anything concrete to see or hear." Unlike most other interpreters, Ketterer states that the poetic structure of "The Bells" superimposes additional meanings other than the traditional human cycle analogy. DuBois believes the poem was a product of Poe's self-deprecation following the death of his wife, Virginia. "Reminding Poe of life and death which cheated him, the bells ... induc (-ed) a kind of madness."[2]

I suggest that Poe also illustrates brilliantly four levels of perception progressively detailing a descent into madness. Several psychological approaches are possible. For example, one could assume that the poem reflects an individual's impressions of four carillons ringing simultaneously. In a psychological light, I tend to discount this possibility because it would give the "narrator" a multiple personality — a phenomenon that neither Poe nor a majority of the medical world in 1848 would likely know to exist. A second approach would be to see four individuals, each in a different stage of mental health, noting their impressions upon hearing bells tolling. Using such a device, an author can achieve rather incisive contrasts in characterization. In "The Bells," however, the parallels between the stanzas, as well as other matters described below, suggest one voice — a voice that Poe measures in four stages of psychic development.

The etherealness of the first stanza suggests dreams unfettered by anxiety. Words such as *merriment, tinkle, crystalline* and *tintinabulation* — none of which is repeated in later sections — connote lightness in both sound and definition. The bells that the narrator hears are silver, the lightest of the metals in the poem. In all, an innocence is established that will be both echoed and corrupted in later passages.

In stanza two, Poe presents a somewhat tainted happiness. Albeit the discord is slight in a shift from delight in thought to that of reality, yet there are signs of stress, particularly: "*What* a gush of euphony voluminously wells!/ How it swells!/ How it dwells/On the future!"[3] These lines imply growth that could be uncontrollable, as well as acknowledging the future's uncertainty. Besides being golden (thus heavier than silver), the bells are mellow. The single melodic voice from the first stanza has evolved into complicated harmony in the second; merriment has become happiness; the "icy air of night" is now balmy. Even the wedded bliss described in the opening lines of the passage is offset later by "the turtle-dove that listens while she gloats." The effect produced is one of happiness with unconscious foreboding — an anxiety that is the seed of alienation.

The psychic distress hinted in the second stanza manifests itself fully in the third. Unable to cope with his environment, the narrator reinterprets the pealing in terms of horror and despair. Paranoiacally, he hears danger ebbing and flowing, sinking and swelling. There are anger and frustration in the loud brazen bells. The harmony of the previous passage has dissolved into shrieks "out of tune." Even within the passage there are indications of increasing mental dissolution: the fire that lunges repeatedly to newer heights, the despair of the bells in their inability to resolve their terror in "the mercy of the fire." Also consider: "With a desperate desire/And a resolute endeavor /Now — now to sit, or never,/By the side of the pale-faced moon."[4] These lines suggest a last, frantic attempt to recover an earlier, less encumbered frame of mind, but this wish is doomed as the tolling continues. Although he reacts to their manifestations, the narrator reveals no conception of the causes for his fears. Essentially, Poe depicts in this section the perception of a man as he passes the thin line dividing sanity and insanity.

In the fourth and final section, Poe presents a view of man at odds with his environment. The stanza begins with the isolation and hypersensitivity of the narrator and then demonstrates how that void is filled. Alienation is established by ironically restating earlier lines.[5] The dense iron bells ring in a single, solemn voice, but unlike the melody of the first stanza it is monotonous. Whereas before the bells "scream out their affright," they now only shiver and groan, suggesting that even hopeless appeals for help are no longer attempted. The bells divest themselves of human behavior and emotion, becoming

"Ghouls" symbolized poetically by a king dementedly yelling and dancing. Thus, the narrator fills his self-created mental void with delusions inspired by the same bells that had earlier seemed heavenly.

Other textual features support and supplement this reading. Each successive stanza of "The Bells" is longer than its predecessor. Subliminally, one effect produced by this experimental structure is that the reader feels compelled to read each successive line faster and faster. If this theory is valid, the final passage would consequently be read at breakneck speed: thus, approximating the violent ravings of a lunatic.[6] The maniacal repetitions, especially in the final eighteen lines, further reinforce this impression. One is presented with madness that is incessant — that can be relieved only by death. Clinical instances of such insanity are rare: occasionally, schizophrenics lapse into irreversible, frenzied behavior, often resulting in physical collapse and death.[7]

The dynamics of Poe's vision in "The Bells" under such analysis show the poem to be more remarkable than is usually believed. Deriving inspiration from either observation, education or self-examination, Poe expertly chronicled the human mind in decay — a feat which he integrated with allegory and poetic mastery in "The Bells."

NOTES

[1] Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 96.

[2] Paul O. Williams, "A Reading of Poe's 'The Bells'," *PN* [now *PoeS*], 1 (1968), 24-25; Richard M. Fletcher, *The Stylistic Development of Edgar Allan Poe* (The Hague, 1973), p. 68; David Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979), p. 153; Arthur E. DuBois, "The Jazz Bells of Poe," *CE,* 2 (1940), 241-42. DuBois assumes that Poe the writer reflects Poe the man. I differ in that I believe Poe concerned himself more with artistic and clinical aspects of madness rather than trying to create a poetic mirror of his mental outlook on life.

[3] *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Poems,* ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 1:436.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ketterer sees the repetitions as part of a fusion process which leads "to the quality of indefiniteness that Poe so admired in poetry." See p. 154.

[6] DuBois agrees with such a reading (see p. 243). Professor B. F. Fisher of the University of Mississippi suggested this alternative: "... or does this structure slow

one? Such a tactic could coalesce with dying, madness, or death."

[7] Poe would likely know of clinical works such as Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations, upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia, 1812).