Text: “The Birth-Mark” by Nathanial Hawthorne and “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe

Passage 1: “Until now, he had not been aware of the tyrannizing influence acquired by one idea over his mind, and of the lengths which he might find in his heart to go, for the sake of giving himself peace” (Hawthorne 1291-1292).

Passage 2: “It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night…I think it was his eye!...by degrees—very gradually, I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (Poe 1572).

Passage 3: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge...At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled…” (Poe 1593).

Question: In the works presented, what do each of the main characters, Alymer (“The Birth-Mark”), the madman (“The Tell-Tale Heart”), and Montresor (“The Cask of Amontillado”), have in common with regard to their contorted pursuits of egocentric gratification resulting in human sacrifice—or murder?

Issue: Issue of Pattern. Both Hawthorne and Poe explicitly describe the step by step scheme by which each character pursues his quest for self-gratification. Hawthorne first presents the thought procession of Aylmer’s disapproval and increasing repulsion of Georgiana’s birth-mark. The
reader is then exposed to Aylmer’s calculating attempts to achieve perfection and scientific success at any cost. Like, Hawthorne, Poe also takes the reader through the devious and methodical steps that the madman and Montresor perform in order to rid themselves of the evils each of them perceive as a threat in one way or another.

**Critical Approach:** The critical evaluation of these works would be most suited by the psychoanalytic approach. Psychoanalysis deals with the unconscious emotional state of individuals which often times focuses on the false mental conception of facts, or delusions. It is apparent in each of these stories that the main character suffers from a state of delusion on some level. More specifically, each of their delusions stems from their egocentric attitudes with regard to their status in life.

**Answer:** In pursuit of satisfying their own desires, each of the characters acted on behalf of self-satisfaction and arrogance with little regard for human life. The characteristics and actions of Aylmer are representative of not only arrogance, but male chauvinism, which from a woman’s perspective touches on delusion. He seeks perfection in spite of nature, putting himself above God’s will. At the same time, Poe depicts Montresor as the epitome of a self-righteous, deceitful creature—also delusional. Montresor vows to avenge Fortunato’s defamations by punishing him, but by doing so with impunity (1593). Meanwhile, the madman in *The Tell-Tale Heart* displays characteristics more accurately associated with delusional psychosis, though still exhibiting condescension when first visited by police. The actions of these men instilled within them a false sense of pride, giving rise to their willingness to go to any lengths to become the master of their obsession.
Hawthorne and Poe do not directly divulge the effects the murder of each victim had on the characters Aylmer and Montresor, respectively, but to live with the knowledge that a life has been sacrificed at your own hand, must surely weigh heavy on a man’s soul until he is but a shadow of the man he was. The undoing of the madman is evidence of this theory—proving that each was not only the master of his obsession, but the master of his despondent fate.