ORIENTAL EXOTICISM, SYMBOLIC IMAGERY, AND THE POETIC REPRESENTATION OF INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS IN THE WORKS OF WASHINGTON IRVING AND EDGAR ALLAN POE

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Abstract

This thesis examines the literary transformation of Eastern cultural motifs in the writings of Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe, focusing on exotic settings, symbolic imagery, narrative mediation, and representations of intercultural encounters. Through comparative close reading of Irving's Tales of the Alhambra and A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada alongside Poe's "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" and "Al Aaraaf," the study identifies two contrasting Romantic approaches to the East. Irving combines historical imagination, legendary narration, and architectural memory to construct an ambivalent cultural contact zone; Poe reworks inherited Oriental narrative frames into ironic, speculative, and metaphysical experiments. The analysis distinguishes aesthetic fascination from historical knowledge and argues that both writers simultaneously expand American Romantic expression and reproduce selectively imagined versions of Eastern cultures. The tables summarize the dominant motifs and their narrative functions rather than presenting quantitative findings.

Keywords: Washington Irving; Edgar Allan Poe; Oriental exoticism; American Romanticism; symbolism; intercultural relations; The Alhambra; Scheherazade; comparative poetics.

Introduction

The nineteenth-century American literary imagination developed within expanding transatlantic circuits of travel writing, translated tales, antiquarian history, and popular representations of Asia, North Africa, and Islamic Spain. Within these circuits, "the East" was neither a stable geographic unit nor a transparent cultural reality. It frequently operated as a textual category through which authors negotiated distance, desire, unfamiliarity, historical memory, and the limits of Western perception. Romantic writers used apparently distant worlds to challenge habitual forms of expression, while their works could also perpetuate reductive cultural generalizations.

Washington Irving (1783–1859) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) provide a productive comparison because their uses of Eastern-associated materials differ in genre and literary intention. Irving's encounters with the Spanish-Moorish past emphasize sites, stories, and layered traditions; Poe's borrowings more often unsettle the reader through parody, imaginative excess, and enigmatic symbols. The purpose of this thesis is to explain how exoticism, symbolic imagery, and intercultural relations operate as poetic structures rather than merely as decorative themes. Its method is qualitative, comparative textual analysis informed by the critique of Orientalist representation articulated by Said (1978).

Main Body

1. Oriental exoticism as an aesthetic and narrative category

In Romantic literature, exoticism often begins with spatial and temporal displacement: unfamiliar architecture, remote landscapes, unusual rituals, and legendary histories distance the fictional world from

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everyday experience. Such estrangement has a double effect. It enables creative experimentation, but it may also convert complex societies into an easily consumed atmosphere of mystery. Accordingly, the relevant question is not simply whether an author describes an Eastern setting, but who narrates that setting, which voices are heard, and how the scene is made meaningful for an Anglophone audience (Said, 1978).

Irving approaches Eastern-coded culture through the mediated historical space of Granada. The Alhambra is a real monument and a literary setting, whereas its depicted legends are reshaped by storytelling conventions. Poe frequently proceeds in the opposite direction: he begins with recognizable Oriental narrative signs and transforms them into formal devices. The contrast suggests that exotic imagery can function either as a vehicle of cultural remembrance or as a means of questioning the authority of narration itself.

2. Washington Irving: architecture, legend, and the cultural palimpsest

In Tales of the Alhambra (1832), the palace complex offers more than picturesque scenery. Its courtyards, halls, inscriptions, gardens, and ruins function as mnemonic images that connect material space with stories of former inhabitants. The narrator’s movement through the site makes reading an architectural analogue of historical inquiry: what is visibly present points toward a past that survives only through fragments and narrated recollections. As a consequence, the Alhambra becomes a symbol of both cultural achievement and the vulnerability of historical memory (Irving, 1832).

Irving places travel observation alongside marvelous tales and local anecdote. This mixture blurs conventional boundaries between document and legend, giving oral tradition an important, although mediated, role. Encounters with guides, storytellers, and residents imply that knowledge of the past depends on interaction rather than on solitary observation. Nevertheless, the narrator remains the principal arranger of cultural meaning. That asymmetry is important: the apparent celebration of Moorish inheritance should not be confused with direct access to an unfiltered Moorish voice.

In A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada (1829), the cultural encounter is shaped more explicitly by conflict and historical retrospection. Christian and Muslim perspectives are framed within a narrated history of conquest, where chivalric admiration can coexist with a story centered on political defeat. The book thus exposes a tension in Irving’s work between admiration for an artistic legacy and the narrative conventions by which that legacy is incorporated into a European-centered account (Irving, 1829).

3. Edgar Allan Poe: ironic storytelling and symbolic distance

Poe’s “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” (1845) revisits the frame of the Arabian Nights by imagining an additional tale told by Scheherazade. The story reverses readers’ expectations: phenomena recognizable to modern audiences are presented to the fictional listener as preposterous marvels. This reversal transforms the exotic tale into a satire on credibility and the uneven relation between knowledge and belief. Scheherazade serves not simply as an alluring Eastern figure but as a narrator who dramatizes the risks of telling truths to an audience unwilling to accept them (Poe, 1845).

The tale’s layered narration also complicates cultural authority. A Western writer appropriates a familiar Middle Eastern storytelling frame, but then uses the borrowed frame to expose how standards of plausibility change with historical location and audience. The result is playful rather than ethnographic. Its intercultural dynamics lie in the encounter between inherited narrative conventions and nineteenth-century scientific discourse, not in an accurate depiction of everyday Eastern life.

In the poem “Al Aaraaf” (1829), a title associated with Islamic eschatological terminology becomes part of an elaborate Romantic cosmology. Poe reshapes the allusion through idealized beauty, celestial distance, and questions of perception. The poem should therefore be read as a selective imaginative

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adaptation, not a systematic statement of Islamic theology. The symbol's principal literary work is to open an ambiguous threshold between the terrestrial and the transcendent (Poe, 1829).

4. Comparative model of poetic devices

The authors share a preference for settings and references that exceed the familiar world of their anticipated readers; however, the structure of their imaginative labor is different. Irving tends to anchor wonder in a place bearing historical traces, while Poe makes wonder unstable through wit, speculation, and metaphysical abstraction. The following comparison identifies interpretive tendencies rather than fixed characteristics of every text.

Table 1. Comparative functions of Eastern-associated motifs

Analytical dimension	Washington Irving	Edgar Allan Poe
Primary literary mode	Travel sketch, historical romance, legend	Satirical tale, symbolic and speculative poetry
Representative locus	The Alhambra and the history of Granada	Scheherazade's narrative frame; "Al Aaraaf"
Dominant imagery	Palaces, gardens, ruins, inscriptions	Marvels, thresholds, celestial landscapes
Function of the exotic	Reconstructs an evocative historical atmosphere	Disrupts assumptions about reality and interpretation
Intercultural tension	Admiration versus mediated historical authority	Borrowed tradition versus formal reinterpretation

The comparison demonstrates that the same broad category, "Oriental exoticism," covers distinct poetic operations. Irving's images of ruins ask how historical knowledge survives, whereas Poe's narrative paradoxes ask how knowledge is judged. Both cases require attention to literary form before any claim can be made about the writer's cultural attitude.

5. Intercultural relations, representation, and interpretive limits

Interculturality in these texts is not always expressed as a direct dialogue between representatives of two cultures. Often it takes the form of mediation among storytellers, readers, translators, literary conventions, and inherited images. Irving's narrated encounters with Spanish-Moorish memory create a sense of contact across historical distance; Poe's refashioning of Scheherazade exemplifies contact between narrative traditions across textual circulation. Neither kind of exchange is culturally neutral. The speaking position, the arrangement of evidence, and the selective use of recognizable signs all condition the reader's sense of the represented world.

Said's (1978) conceptual framework is useful here as a caution against treating "the Orient" as a self-evident object, although it should not replace close analysis of individual works. Irving's nostalgia for Granada may register respect and curiosity even while filtering its subjects through romance; Poe's parody can expose the relativity of cultural judgments even while mobilizing an exoticized frame. A balanced reading therefore recognizes imaginative openness and representational limitation at the same time.

Table 2. Symbolic images and their interpretive significance

Text / motif	Symbolic meaning	Intercultural implication
Tales of the Alhambra / ruins	Loss, survival, and historical memory	The past is encountered through material traces and

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		narrated legend
Conquest of Granada / contested city	Power, transition, and remembrance	Admiration is framed by a history of political conflict
Scheherazade / storytelling	Voice, credibility, and survival	The familiar tale is reworked to question assumptions about truth
“Al Aaraaf” / liminal realm	Transcendence, beauty, and distance	An inherited concept is transformed into Romantic metaphysical symbolism

Taken together, the tables show why symbol and context must be interpreted together. A palace, a narrator, or a cosmological name cannot be assigned a single universal meaning outside its surrounding genre and rhetorical purpose. They are dynamic figures through which American Romantic literature imagines its relationship with cultural alterity.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis establishes that Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe develop different but connected strategies for transforming Eastern-associated materials into literary form. Irving’s poetic language privileges architecture, place, legend, and historical layering; Poe’s privileges narrative irony, the instability of belief, and transcendent symbolism. In both, exoticism is productive as an artistic technique, yet it remains inseparable from the limits of cultural mediation. The representation of the East is therefore best understood not as a faithful cultural portrait but as a site where American Romantic writers test forms of memory, wonder, authority, and knowledge. Further research could examine translations and reception histories to identify which specific intercultural channels informed these works and how contemporary readers interpreted them.

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