The Idea of a split self is one that the Gothic novel uses to create tales of horror. The idea is that within each individual there are two warring parts—the primitive and the culturally domesticated—is a concept that Aya Yatsugi explores in her essay “The Double in Gothic Romances”. Yatsugi’s concept of the split self works well as a starting point for the ideas presented by Edgar Allen Poe regarding the internal self. Both writers share many of the same concepts regarding the internal division of the individual. Each individual internalizes the concepts of their society alongside their own individual constructs; this combination creates the basic idea of the internal self. In a select reading of Poe’s short stories, the internal self is put under a microscope and appears to be a construct with multiple divisions. The divisions of the internal self include the perverse self, or the Id, and the lawful superego. The perverse self, or the internal self, consisting of the Id, clashes with the strict laws of society while the morally righteous superego works alongside the laws of society and strives to uphold them. The characters in Poe’s stories tend to follow the wishes of their perversity leading them to be punished by a superego that holds them accountable for their despicable acts. Due to an internalized concept of accountability the law is upheld through the punishment of the manifested actions of the perverse self.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the internal self in conjunction with the law creates its own internal concept of accountability that must exist in order for punishment to
be derived. The internal self is defined as the internally constructed and combined values, emotions, and impulses of the individual. This module of the internal self also includes the constructs of society and perverseness. Perverseness is defined as the desire to do wrong in spite of knowing it is socially and morally wrong. It is through the lens of the internal self under the authority of the law that accountability and punishment are examined. Accountability is derived from a clear inner concept of the self within society. Punishment within the selected stories is defined as corporal punishment under the law. Accountability is the ability to recognize one has done wrong, and claiming responsibility for one’s actions. Without a concept of accountability, there cannot be a punishment as this definition of accountability relies on the internal self and its internalization of society. The story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” elaborates on the need for a working concept of accountability to precede punishment. “The Black Cat” demonstrates the power of guilt wielded by the superego. “The Imp of the Perverse” demonstrates the driving desire of perversity under command of the id. These three stories work in tandem show the relationship between the internal self in regards to accountability and punishment.

Multiple critics of the Gothic genre have maintained that the inner workings of the self are integral to the concept of accountability. Christopher Peterson, in his essay “The Aping Apes of Poe and Wright”, writes that “[a]ccountability implies the capacity to reason, to comprehend right and wrong, to think causally in order to connect deeds to an authorial subject” (Peterson 2). Peterson explains that the faculties of the mind need to be present and able to comprehend right and wrong in order for accountability to exist. Peterson presents an important base to understanding the concept of accountability in the Gothic; however this notion requires the addition of the remaining parts of the internal self in order to fit the purpose of my argument.

Critics have noted that there is a distinction between the two Freudian structures of the
mind: the Id and superego in the Gothic often have different motives. Yatsugi explains this division of the internal self in her essay, “The Doubling in the Gothic Romance”, when she discusses Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: “Jekyll is terrified to find himself changed unconsciously into Hyde, the embodiment of his Id” (Yatsugi 2). Here Yatsugi is presenting an idea that the Id is capable of working separately from the other parts of the inner self, and that there is a division that exists in one being. It is this conflicting division that has been integrated into my essay, however unlike Yatsugi, I will present an idea of the split Id and Superego that does not result in a physical split, and only as an internal split of the character’s mind. Yatsugi also notes that the unconscious superego is a powerful mechanism that is capable of spawning physical representations of guilt. The source that Yatsugi uses to explain this concept is the story of “William Wilson” by Poe. In this story, the character is split in two. One side is born out of the conscious mind and represents the character’s superego, which eventually gives the original William a death sentence (Yatsugi 8). The superego, or second William, was brought into being in an attempt to control the original’s impulses (Yatsugi 8). Yatsugi uses the stories of William and Dr. Jekyl to address the importance of the divided internal self in the Gothic. The concept of a divided and conflicting internal self will be expanded upon as Poe utilizes it in his story “The Black Cat”.

The Id itself in the Gothic is often represented through the workings of Perverseness: an integral part of the Gothic and the internal self that requires understanding before accountability and punishment can be addressed in full. Perverseness is a concept that is bound to the Gothic and one that ties in closely with the Id. Arthur Brown in his essay “Death and Telling in Poe's The Imp of the Perverse” writes of the power of perverseness and how a character’s perverseness can lead to his punishment by way of a confession (Brown 2). Brown’s idea of perverseness
relies heavily on a working concept of accountability such as Peterson uses and stems from the divided-self that is used by Yatsugi. Brown remarks, “The imp of the Perverse “is a story of a confession” (Brown 2). While Brown ascertains that Perverseness is integral to the story, he also asserts the power of accountability in regards to perverseness. The relationship between accountability and perverseness is one that I have taken the time to explore in greater detail. A combination of these different critical views allows for the development of my argument as it works to explain accountability and punishment as derivatives of the internal self.

The internal self is derived from the working faculties of the mind; without such devices the internal self cannot possibly view accountability in such a way that denotes proper punishment. “The Murders in The Rue Morgue“details a grotesque defiance of the laws set forth by society, and yet no one is held accountable despite there being a clear perpetrator. The reason for the lack of accountability and by denomination punishment is due to the determination that the perpetrator is without the faculties required. This conclusion can be reached through an examination of the word “accountability” alongside a look at what is meant by having working faculties of the mind. Christopher Peterson argues “[a]ccountability implies the capacity to reason, to comprehend right and wrong, to think caus-ally in order to connect deeds to an authorial subject” (Peterson 2). Accountability also means the capacity for taking responsibility for actions committed and face the results of those actions.

Mimicry works against a concept of accountability in order to create a situation where accountability is unable to exist. The ape is not punished for its deeds, which gives rise to the question of what makes one accountable. The reason for the absolution of the ape stems from the concept of mimicry. The ape is seen to be mimicking what he saw a barber do as depicted within the recounting of the sailor’s story; the “gigantic animal…was flourishing the razor… in
imitations of the motions of a barber” (Poe 265). By forgoing the punishment of the ape, Poe asserts the notion that animals are capable of mimicry but “lack the faculties of reason that elevates humans above all other organisms”(Peterson 15). As a result, Poe concurs with Peterson has demonstrated that the faculties of reason, an integral part of the internal self which only humans posses, must be present in order for accountability to exist.

The superego works alongside the law and uses guilt as a means to regulate the actions of the self. Guilt leads a man, who was on the cusp of escaping punishment, to reveal his crimes and thus submitting himself for prosecution. Poe’s “The Black Cat” demonstrates the internal power of a guilty conscious and forces the narrator of the story to reveal his wife’s body to police. The narrator is insistent that he feels no guilt. He is so intent on convincing the reader he feels no remorse for the murder of his wife, he states, “I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro” (Poe 355). It is strange that a guiltless man feels the need to exonerate himself to a reader who knows of his crime, strange enough for the reader to conclude that this narrator is unreliable, in that his telling may not accurately convey the events of the story to the reader. Furthermore, he walks to and fro, in other words he paces; an action commonly associated with the nervous and guilty. Once it is understood that the narrator is unreliable in nature as his actions show him to be, it becomes not a desire to taunt the police of his crime, but a wish to confess his deeds when he moves to rap his cane on the wall. He describes his wish to mention the very place his wife is hidden as a “rabid desire to say something” (Poe 355), the desire to condemn himself to punishment stems from his superego. His internal self is plaguing him with the guilt of his deed and pushing him to reveal the crime. He is compelled to rap on the wall with his cane, and in doing so causes the cat
boarded within to unleash an inhuman cry; the cry alerts the policemen to the body’s location, thus sealing his fate.

The unconscious superego is a powerful force; it is so powerful that it can manifest a man’s guilt into a physical form. There exists a notion that the second cat might not have fully existed, but instead have been the product of a man’s guilty conscience. The evidence for this stems from an excerpt at the beginning of the story, where the inspiration of the story is noted as coming from a delusional man. He tells his physician he saw a black cat, which came and went without explanation in such a manner that he believed it to be a product of his depraved imagination (Poe 348). In her essay, Yatsugi discusses that one’s consciousness can split and provide a physical representation of the superego, which attempts to punish the consciousness that spawned it (Yatsugi 8). It is possible to present the second cat as such a manifestation when the narrator examines the cat’s physical appearance. The narrator notes that an area of the cat’s coat had begun to take the shape “of a ghastly thing—of the Gallows!” (Poe 353). This description, when combined with the narrator’s previous violent actions towards his last cat, leads to the conclusion that his mind is becoming like the mind of the man whose story might have inspired Poe. The narrator is clearly plagued by such a guilty mind that he has begun to see physical manifestations of his past deeds in otherwise mundane objects. These delusions lead him to a point where he becomes unable to sleep and suffers from dreams containing “unutterable fear” (Poe 353). The fear and delusions are all creations of his superego in an effort to make him feel the guilt that eventually gets him to confess his later murder of his wife.

There exists a relationship between accountability and the Id-derived perverseness that consumes the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse”. Accountability is a necessary component for perverse actions to be enjoyed. Knowing that an action is wrong and doing that action
regardless is what brings the Id gratification. This concept is demonstrated in “The Imp of the Perverse” when the narrator states, “how rich a sentiment of satisfaction arose in my bosom as I reflected upon my absolute security” (Poe 404). The narrator is reveling in his crimes, and admits that he enjoys knowing that his misdoings have so far escaped detection. The entire story is written by the narrator and acts as his confession. In writing his story the narrator takes responsibility for his actions while at the same time immortalizing his deeds. The immortalization is achieved through Brown’s description of a “moment of transference” (Brown 2) where the narrator’s body dies, but his being is transferred into language, thus immortalizing him. The immortalization allows for the narrator’s existence to continue in his writings, while also allowing him to boast eternally of his deeds allowing for his Id to receive gratification long after his body dies. By acknowledging his accountability, the narrator is able to boast of his crimes and thereby gain a sense of immortal satisfaction.

The relationship between perversity and accountability continues in the form of punishment. While it was noted that the narrator is immortalized through his writings, his physical form is still the subject of punishment. It is a self-inflicted punishment that is brought about through the desires of the perverse self. An inner desire to claim public accountability for his perverseness drives the narrator to “[cosign himself] to the hangman and to hell” (Poe 406). The narrator relates a memory of his childhood where he says, “I had had some experience in these fits of Perversity … and I remembered that in no instance had I successfully resisted their attacks” (Poe 406). He knows that he must not speak of the crime the same way he knew that he must not commit murder, but as with the last incident he surrenders to his Id’s need for pleasure. The pleasure in this case is the result of claiming responsibility for his perversity, however this time it is done despite the punishment that will be given for such a confession. The compulsion is
one that he cannot ignore and it results in his presumed punishment. Perversity drove the narrator to punishment by compelling him to commit one last act of perversity; the act of suicide as he knowingly submitted himself for a punishment that would result in his death.

The concept of punishment is a man-made convention, which an accountable superego seeks out after an Id-derived crime is committed. The man-made convention of punishment stems from “The Murder’s in the Rue Morgue” where it was explained that an ape does not posses the faculties required for accountability to exist. The very faculties required for accountability are found within man making them a convention of man. The part of the internal self, ruled by the internalized laws of society, the superego, brings about the ruin of an unreliable yet guilty narrator in “The Black Cat”. While the superego sees that punishment is brought down on the individual, it is the impulsive and perverse actions of the Id that drives a man to kill in “The Imp of the Perverse”, yet perverseness relies on a concept of accountability to gain satisfaction. Ultimately in his short stories Poe utilizes the Gothic genre to put forth the notion that an internal self is accountable and both desires to commit perverse actions, but also seeks justice for its own misdeeds.

Works Cited

