



Poe's "Al-Aaraaf": A Critical Analysis of Culture-Bound Borrowing in Literary Diction

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Received: 10.04.2026 • Accepted: 30.05.2026 • Published: 05.07.2026 • Final Version: 30.07.2026

Abstract: This paper examines Edgar Allan Poe's unique use of literary borrowing in the title of his longest poem, "Al-Aaraaf," and critically analyzes the cultural and linguistic implications of employing a Culture-Bound Term (CBT) within a cross-cultural literary context. Utilizing Eugene Nida's theory of Dynamic Equivalence and Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the study investigates whether Poe's selection of "Al-Aaraaf"—a term derived directly from the Holy Quran—was motivated by phonetic appeal or religious significance. This lexical choice reflects an "Orientalist effect" where the author prioritizes exoticism over semantic fidelity. The study finds that Poe's usage constitutes a fundamental departure from the term's theological origins, specifically by reimagining a Quranic space of divine judgment as an "amoral" celestial star. This research argues that cultural appropriation in literature should adhere to ethical translation standards, particularly regarding religiously sensitive CBTs. Ultimately, the paper highlights the ethical violations inherent in using borrowing as a decorative poetic device rather than a faithful translational bridge, calling for a standardized ethical framework in cross-cultural literary borrowing.

Keywords: Poe, Al-Aaraaf, The Holy Quran, Borrowing, Translation, Equivalence, Orientalism.

1. Introduction

As a primary mechanism for cross-cultural exchange, translation facilitates the movement of concepts between separate linguistic and societal worlds. It seeks to vitally bridge the gap between disparate languages and cultures. When analyzing literary content through a translational lens, it is assumed that the relationship between text and equivalence—whether through direct transfer or adaptation—must comply with established linguistic and ethical standards. Addressing culture-specific elements in creative writing and translation necessitates adherence to the shared norms of literature and linguistics. In particular, the use of religion-bound terms, especially those from the Islamic tradition, presents a significant challenge, as it requires a delicate balance between linguistic precision and cultural resonance.

This study examines Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Al-Aaraaf" (an English transliteration of the Quranic term *al-A'rāf*) as a case study to explore the complexities and risks inherent in borrowing such a religiously sensitive term. While borrowing is often employed to enrich a target text by introducing unique concepts where no direct equivalent exists, it also exposes the term to potential distortion or

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¹ Note on Transliteration: While several variants exist (e.g., Al-A'raf, Al-Aaraf), this paper uses *Al-A'raf* for the Quranic source and Poe's preferred *Al-Aaraaf* for the literary work."

misrepresentation. This paper investigates the degree to which Poe's usage aligns with or diverges from the original Quranic meaning.

As a fundamental translation technique, borrowing is frequently used to address non-equivalence, particularly when an author deems a term suitable for repurposing in a new context. In "Al-Aaraaf," Poe transitions a religious Islamic term into a broader literary framework, albeit with a significantly altered meaning. While borrowing is an invaluable expressive tool, it should not be employed at the expense of translational fidelity. Prioritizing phonetic appeal over semantic integrity—thereby favoring form over content—undermines the integrity of the source term. Ultimately, Poe's selection of "Al-Aaraaf" highlights the tension between creative borrowing and the obligation to preserve a term's essence, suggesting that his appropriation fails to meet the ethical requirements of linguistic borrowing.

2. Materials, Method, and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology, synthesizing linguistic, literary, and translation-based perspectives.

2.1. Synthesis of Methodology Rather than relying on a purely subjective interpretation of "Al-Aaraaf," the study contrasts the original Quranic designation with the historical and cultural milieu in which Poe was writing. The framework first establishes the Quranic meaning of the term through a thematic analysis of Surah *Al-A'raf* (7), verses 46 to 49. It then explores the systemic influence of 19th-century Orientalist scholarship (notably George Sale and Thomas Moore) on Poe's conceptualization. Finally, the study analyzes the lexical and thematic utility of "Al-Aaraaf" within Poe's poetic context to identify the *effects* of his borrowing—specifically how the transition from a religious register to a Romantic-poetic register altered the term's ontological essence.

2.2. Equivalence and Borrowing Theory Translation necessitates a versatile approach, ranging from a broad focus on full expressions to a narrower focus on individual terms. One such method is "calque," or "loan translation" (LT). Al-Athwary and Ali (2024: 2) state that loan translation "is a specific type of loan shift," citing Haugen (1972), who defines LT as "morphemic substitution without importation." Conversely, Volf (2020: 2) notes that borrowing is a technique for taking a word or expression directly from the source language, further classifying the practice into "pure borrowing" and "naturalized borrowing" (terms adjusted to the phonetic and morphological systems of the target language).

In principle, languages should be "judged by their structures and linguistic components regardless of their political, religious or social states" (Alduais, 2012: 504). However, Alduais also observes that "Arabic, nonetheless, is religiously viewed by the West, being the language of the Qur'an." This preconceived Western perception of Arabic likely influenced how the language was utilized by authors like Poe.

2.3. Nida's Dynamic Equivalence In discussing "functional equivalence," Li (2021: 12) denotes that Nida (1964) believed "the translator should focus on the meaning and spirit of the original text,

rather than the formal equivalence of the language structure." This study investigates Poe's appropriation through this lens: did Poe maintain the "spirit" of *Al-Aaraaf*? While borrowing is a recognized translation strategy—addressed by scholars such as Mona Baker and Vinay & Darbelnet for its efficacy and limitations—Poe's appropriation maintained neither the meaning nor the spirit of the original. The only element preserved was its prosodic and formal value.

2.4. Said's Orientalism Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is applied to explore the factors behind Poe's deviation from established ethical practices. The 19th century was defined by a Western interest in the Arabo-Islamic world, often filtered through colonial desires. This study frames Poe's work not as a deliberate attempt at distortion, but as a product of an Orientalist system where knowledge was transmitted through flawed, biased translations. By examining the *effects* of this systemic bias, we can understand how the sacred became the exotic in Poe's Romantic imagination.

3. The Quranic Concept of "Al-A'raf"

To fully appreciate the significance of Poe's usage, one must trace the term's meaning in its original context. In Surah *Al-A'raf* (7:46-49), the concept refers to a "partition" or "heights" situated between Paradise and Hell. Modern translations illustrate this:

- **Sahih International:** "And between them will be a partition, and upon *al-A'raf* will be men who know everyone by his mark. And they will call out to the companions of Paradise, 'Peace be upon you.' They have not [yet] entered it, but they long [to do so]."
- **Yusuf Ali:** "Between them shall be a veil, and on the Heights will be men who know every one by certain marks: they shall call out to the Companions of the Garden, 'Peace on you': they shall not have entered, but they shall have an ardent desire."
- **Pickthall:** "And between them there is a veil. And on the Heights are men who know them all by their marks. And they call unto the dwellers of the Garden: Peace be unto you! They have not entered it, but they hope (to enter)."

As noted by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1985: 410), this is a "difficult passage" often interpreted through three distinct schools of thought. Some view the men on the Heights as angels or spiritually exalted beings; others view them as souls whose good and evil deeds are evenly balanced, waiting for Allah's mercy. Regardless of the interpretation, *Al-A'raf* is a site of profound theological weight—a station of divine judgment and theodicy.

4. Poe's Perception and the Borrowing of "Al-Aaraaf"

In stark contrast to the Quranic depiction, Poe's poem "Al-Aaraaf" presents a fundamentally different and highly personalized vision. Poe reimagines the term through the lens of American Romanticism, utilizing it to express philosophical themes of discrepancy and otherworldliness.

4.1. The Shift from Judgment to Astronomy

In a May 1829 letter to Isaac Lea, Poe explicitly stated:

"Its title is 'Al Aaraaf' — from the *Al Aaraaf of the Arabians*, a medium between Heaven & Hell where men suffer no punishment, but yet do not attain that tranquil & even happiness... I have placed this 'Al Aaraaf' in the celebrated star discovered by Tycho Brahe... It is represented as a messenger star of the Deity." (Mabbott, 1969)

Mabbott (1969: 92) clarifies that Poe's *Al Aaraaf* is "not a wall between heaven and hell; it is not a place of sorrow, but contentment; its inhabitants are almost wholly amoral." This represents a fundamental semantic departure. By stripping the term of its role as a site of moral judgment and transforming it into an amoral, transient celestial body where souls "sink into forgetfulness," Poe prioritizes the Romantic aesthetic of "apartness" over the source's religious reality.

4.2. The Influence of George Sale and the Chain of Knowledge Transmission

Poe's primary engagement with Islamic terminology was mediated through George Sale's 1734 English version of *The Koran*. As Ganaie (2024: 11) notes, Sale's translation, while influential, "deceived the reader by misinterpreting the message it conveys in the original." Sale's introduction reveals a palpable bias, explicitly labeling the Quran a "manifest forgery" and the Prophet a "false lawgiver." This work was part of a broader "chain of knowledge transmission"—stretching from Du Ryer to Ross and finally to Sale—that Savaşkan (2019) characterizes as "conferences of disbelief" rather than faithful renditions.

This distorted foundation was further shaped by the literary "allure of the Middle East" prevalent in the 19th century. As Al-Kamal (2015: 3-4) observes, citing Samar Attar, the Romantic Movement was profoundly impacted by Arab and Islamic culture. Sources such as the *Arabian Nights*, pre-Islamic poetry, and Muslim mystic tales were available in abundance and served to "excite the imagination" of English and American Romantic poets (Attar, as cited in Al-Kamal, 2015). For Poe, these sources provided a rich but filtered lexicon that prioritized exoticism over theological reality.

Consequently, Poe's access to the realm of Islam was built upon a foundation of misconceptions. This systemic bias is reflected across his broader oeuvre, including works such as "Tamerlane," "To Helen," "The Doomed City," and "Israfel" (Montgomery, 2011). In "Israfel," Poe utilizes the image of "Houri glances" to evoke a sense of beauty "worshiped in yon star," a choice that Montgomery (2011) argues demonstrates a lack of engagement with "real" Islamic theology in favor of pure exoticism. This aligns with Erkkilä's observation that Poe was less interested in religious dogma than he was in utilizing "the Arabians" as figures of "romantic apartness and otherworldliness" (as cited in Montgomery, 2011).

Within *Al-Aaraaf*, this filtered understanding culminates in the term being reimagined as a "material star that becomes the instrument of God in the destruction of the world" (Stovall, 1929: 108). This transformation underscores Wazzan's (1988) assertion that Poe was primarily influenced by dominant Western literary tropes regarding the Orient. From the perspective of translation theory, this departure highlights a failure of "equivalence." As noted by Ivir (1995: 168), Eugene Nida's concept of "formal equivalence" requires the preservation of meaning within the source context. By stripping *Al-Aaraaf*

of its Quranic function as a site of divine judgment, Poe violates these structural norms, prioritizing the Romantic sublime over the ethical requirements of linguistic and cultural correspondence.

5. Analysis and Discussion: Fidelity, Ethics, and Interpretation

It is argued that Poe, through his specialized use of borrowing, sought to create his own layers of meaning for the term according to his artistic vision. However, this personalized perception violates the ethical standards of borrowing, particularly when the religious significance of the source language is ignored.

5.1. The "Orientalist Effect" The study investigates Poe's usage not to accuse him of deliberate malice, but to highlight the *effect* of his reliance on biased sources. Poe valued the phonic aspect of the term—the mysterious "al-" prefix—while alienating its religious gravity. He derived a sense of "otherworldliness" from a Culture-Bound Term to express mystery to an audience for whom the term was equally obscure.

Cairns (1913: 37) accurately observed that "Poe takes even greater liberties with the meaning of the term than with its orthography." By using borrowing as a tool for "explication" to a larger audience while violating the source denotation, Poe created what Enani (1995) calls a "refer-to-the-original translation" (as cited in Abdellah, 2003), which inadvertently highlights a perceived "lexical gap" and makes the source culture appear merely as a provider of "mysterious" ornaments.

5.2. Lexical and Morphological Analysis

The Arabic word أعراف (*A'raf*) is the plural form of عرف (*Urf*), which carries various meanings depending on the register. A review of dictionaries like *Al-Mawrid* (Baalbaki, 1995: 758) and *Almaany* online database reveals the following:

Table 1: The Arabic word "Aaraaf أعراف" in various contexts

Context	English Equivalence
Advertising	Standards
Group Dynamics	Norms
Zoology	Manes / Crests
Religious (Quranic)	The Heights / Elevations between Hellfire and Paradise

Poe's appropriation as a "messenger star" fits none of these established linguistic or theological patterns. In Nida's terms, this is a failure of "spirit-equivalence." The poet prioritized the aesthetic "mystique" of the term over its functional role as a site of divine justice. This "one-sided perspective of meaning" remains a hallmark of 19th-century literary appropriation.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Edgar Allan Poe's choice of "Al-Aaraaf" highlights the profound challenges of borrowing highly sensitive CBTs. When a direct equivalent does not exist, borrowing is often the "easiest way out" for an author, yet it carries the highest risk of misrepresentation. This study offers the following implications for authors, translators, and scholars:

1. **Ethical Guidelines for Borrowing:** Literary borrowing must be governed by an ethical obligation to maintain the "ontological spirit" of the term. If a term is borrowed to represent a culture, its sacred or fundamental meanings should not be sacrificed for phonetic appeal.
2. **Recognition of Systemic Bias:** Scholars must recognize that 19th-century "knowledge transmission" regarding the "Orient" was inherently flawed. Contemporary analysis must account for the way historical sources (like George Sale) acted as barriers rather than bridges.
3. **Pedagogical Recommendations:** Translation pedagogy should focus on the "Ethics of the Other." Students should be trained to evaluate the impact of their lexical choices on the source culture's representation, ensuring that borrowing serves as a cross-cultural medium of communication rather than an instrument of exoticization.
4. **Artistic Freedom vs. Responsibility:** While Romanticism celebrates the sublime and the mysterious, literary borrowing of religious terms should not be used as a "license" to stereotype. Faithfully representing the source text in the target language remains the fundamental basis of translation as a civilizing imperative.

Ultimately, Poe's "Al-Aaraaf" serves as a landmark of Romantic imagination, but also as a cautionary tale regarding the linguistic and ethical pitfalls of cultural borrowing. Adhering to the ethics of literary borrowing remains essential for maintaining the integrity of cross-cultural discourse in a globalized world.

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