

In Search of the Cause of Violence in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Black Cat"

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Abstract--- *This paper aims to shed light on the blurring characterization and the prevailing paradox in Edgar Allen Poe's short story, "The Black Cat." In his critical essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe emphasized the significance of creating unity or totality of effect in his stories which is in contrast with Modernist short story writers and novelists' elliptical and suggestive technique whose major stress is on 'open-endedness' of a work of art. The totality or the main concept he intends to achieve in this short story is the same as the one in "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Tell-Tale Heart," and this concept is violence. Notwithstanding his teleological style, this study intends to show that the end of the story not elucidating the sociological and political side influencing the character, and his perversity which is shown to stem from a superstition, and surprisingly the text which contributes to the reality of the superstition at the end of the story, makes this story more suggestive than what he had aimed for. By taking into consideration the historical, sociological, and biographical context of Poe himself, this study attempts to find a reason behind this violence; this recourse to contexts in which Poe was in is due to the lack of narrator's background, and at the same time, it analyzes the characters' personality through some images using Lacan's Psychoanalysis, and also Zizek's analysis of the concept of "Violence."*

Keywords--- *Totality, Violence, Teleological, Superstition, Suggestive.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe's stories illustrate the summit of 19th-century 'fiction of the horrid', published mainly in the 1830s and 1840s. One of the American Romantics, Poe depicted a fascination with the power of feelings and often searched to find out about those who are guilty in psyches, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart," terrified, as in "The Pit and the Pendulum," or otherwise intellectually inflicted. Poe is furthermore widely considered as the master of Gothic fiction, merging aspects of romance and horror in such stories like "Ligeia," and "The full of the House of Usher" he was also an essential contributor to the enigmatic genre through his stories around the extremely rational detective C. Auguste Dupin (such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter").

Poe intended to build what he defined as a unity of effect in his stories, where every aspect of the story helped to its overall mood. Having published a number of volumes of poetry beforehand to the attempt he had his first short stories, he was already used to establishing the tone of a work with a relative economy of words. Also, over the next two decades, he gained extensive experience as an editor and literary critic, and he formed an aesthetic theory based on this idea of unity. In his short stories, Poe's literary theory led him to create relatively short tales which admitted no extraneous details that could not substantiate the atmospheres of foreboding or horror for which he became so

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famous. *"The Cask of Amontillado"* is particularly famous for its short length and concise structure. Even though he passed away at a young age under somehow bizarre contexts that probably was related to alcohol, he succeeded in bringing the Gothic tale, a genre formerly considered as somewhat outdated and European, to American Romantic fiction.

Most of Poe's short stories were written as he moved from editorial position to editorial position, never quite gaining a satisfactory level of stability in his life, which may have influenced his writing. In particular, he spent much of his adult life addicted to opium and to alcohol, giving him an especially intimate understanding of the mentalities of some of his psychotic protagonists.

"The Black Cat" bears neat similarities with the story of the *"The Tell-Tale Heart"* in that it starts with an anonymous narrator who has been arrested for murder and who persists that he cannot be insane before he begins an account of a murder that he committed. Unlike *"The Tell-Tale Heart,"* however, we have a man who is aware of the transformation in himself that has led him to become a murderer, although he cannot totally explain it, and we even have a potential cause for his insanity in the form of alcohol. Whereas the protagonist of *"The Tell-Tale Heart"* explains his case for murder as if his logic were obvious and inevitable, the narrator of *"The Black Cat"* is on some level aware of his unreasonableness, even though he chooses to ignore it and succumb to the baser human emotions of perversity and hatred.

One aspect of the narrator's personality that he shares with several of Poe's characters is that in spite of his total lack of normal moralities and good judgment, he uses some reason and logic to stay away from admissions of his mental abnormality. Particularly, when he sees the image of his cat on the one remaining wall of his house after it burns down, he tries to ignore superstition and offer a reasonable, scientific explanation for its existence. The paper intends to analyze the gothic, mystical and biblical elements behind it to shed light on the invisible elements that we might take for granted. Then we will have a sociological analysis to see how there can be a parallel with the whole world's violence.

II. VIOLENCE

Like other Romantic writers, Poe was interested in the demonic for other reasons than amateur dabbling in occult lore. He was fascinated by the relationship between human destiny and demonic power. As the Romantics cited Socrates as a figure who was directed by a personal demon, Poe explored in demonology a logic for fictional characterization that was influenced by ancient theories of human fate. In this regard, he and other Romantics turned to the ancient Greek tradition of the "demon." Thus, he learned that daemons were intermediary spirits, half-mortal and half-divine. Their onus was to "distribute" the destiny of individual men. Daemons need not to have diabolical characteristics, because they were guardians of mankind. The Greek notion of demonology also became attractive to Poe due to its association with skill or knowledge. In the artist-oriented world of Romantic poetry, the poet could be, literally and metaphorically, possessed [5]. Therefore, the demonic impulse became connected with poetic revelation or inward energy without the attendant strictures of orthodox religion. Possession was a morally ambiguous experience, both analysing and terrifying. Sir Walter Scott illustrated these concepts in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, wherein he commented: "The idea of identifying the pagan deities, especially the most distinguished

of them, with the manifestation of demonic (daemonic) power... is not certainly lightly to be rejected" [2].

"*The Black Cat*," is about a narrator's physical torment of a cat named Pluto, his subsequent torment by a second black feline, the killing of his wife, and then leaving of her body in the damp cellar of his home. We can approach "*The Black Cat*" instructively as an analysis of its narrator's involvement with demon force, symbolized by the cat itself. As Gayle Denington Anderson has shown, demonic lore and medieval superstition stated that dark powers were often focused in cats, such legendary having three basic manifestations in Poe's tale. First, demons were connected with feelings of oppression or weight that could hamper human breathing.

Poe's narrator suffers from such a feeling when the second cat appears: "I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon my heart" (III, 856). In his Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft, which Poe probably was aware of, Sir Walter Scott explicates the psychic disorder of a nightmare; "In the nightmare, oppression and suffocation are felt, and our fancy conjures up a specter to lie on our bosom." More particularly, one of Scott's case studies is preoccupied with a man influenced by a ghost. The man says, "I was embarrassed by the presence of a large cat, which came and disappeared I could not exactly tell how, till the truth was finally forced upon me, and I was compelled to regard it as no domestic household cat, but as a bubble of the elements, which has no existence save in my... depraved imagination".

Secondly, daemons were connected with a feeling of being frozen or paralyzed. The cat in Poe's tale claws at the narrator's clothing and generally impedes his movement and progress. Thirdly, "nightmares" or "nightriders" evoke sensations of demon dread. The narrator's reaction to the second cat is "absolute dread of the beast" (III, 855). Furthermore, "This dread was not exactly dread of physical evil—and yet, I should be at a loss to otherwise define it"(III, 855). His sensation cannot be defined easily because it is a mixture of elevation and horror. He professes agony over his degradation, but significantly, his senses also thrill to a height of emotion never experienced.

The tale has been viewed as an analysis in perverseness, however, the cat also works out as an outward symbol of the narrator's demonic possession. He clearly shows "a rage more than demoniacal" (III, 856) when he kills his wife. His response to Pluto, instead of only revulsion, is fascination by its character of "Phantasm" (III, 853). Also, after seeing its imprint in bas-relief, he admits that his "wonder" and his "terror were extreme" (III, 853). The relation of the demonic with mental power is clear when he salutes the cat's intelligence. The cat "was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise" (III, 850). This passage is probably the narrator's the most explicit allusion to the daemonic legendry that fills the tale.

The demonic qualities of Pluto are more emphasized by the narrator's doubt that the cat is weakening his energy. His ethical vitality steadily diminishes, and by incremental turns, such power is absorbed by the cat. When scratched, he exclaims, "The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My authentic soul seemed immediately to take flight from my body; and a more devilish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame" (III, 851). This reaction is the elementary stage of his ethical disintegration, and he goes on hastily to

cut out the eye of the cat. The flight of his soul indicates that he has lost power and control over his actions. His reaction prepares the reader for his subsequent sense of suffocation, since a traditional belief, based on Biblical texts and other sources, asserted that man's soul and breath were somehow bonded.

By considering cats as sources of demonic power, one need not downplay the narrator's responsibility for his actions in "The Black Cat." Poe's handling of the daemonic is not so thoroughly deterministic that the narrator is pitted against an uncontrollable force—even if one calls this force perversity of demonology. As in "The Raven," Poe internalized his narrator's plight. Just as the raven is initially a positive symbol to the student, the black cat is introduced as a model of domestic virtue. The change from domestic house cat to a fiendish demon is compatible with the narrator's moral decline. As other critics have depicted, the dramatic irony in "The Black Cat" emerges from the narrator's rejection to recognize his self-indulgence by blaming his problems on the power of human perversity. The demonic framework of the tale alerts the reader to another element of dramatic irony. The narrator's allusions to demonology, like his blaming of alcohol, may be another means of explaining away his moral responsibility. Acting as an agent of fate or as a sign of the narrator's self-incrimination, the cat emerges at locations that are damning to him. It emerges on the hogshead of rum to remind him of his intemperance, on the head of his bed to remind him of his domestic irresponsibility, and on the head of the corpse to remind him of his most heinous crime. Finally, the gallows-like shape on its breast is emblematic of his fate. Poe has made the demonic cat an inextricable part of the narrator's psychology, but just as significantly, a symbolic reminder of his destined punishment. Nowhere is this demonic allusion more explicit than at the end of the tale. The sound from the walls of the tomb is shown in explicitly demonic terms. No sooner had the resonance of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first suffocated and broken, like a sobbing child, and then fast swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, completely anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have happened out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in damnation. (III, 859-9).

The narrator may state that the cry is the victor sounding of a beast, however, one readily finds out that he has once again incriminated himself. The cry may just as well be interpreted as the wail of his wife that will unceasingly echo in his conscience. All over the tale, he has manipulated language to evade exposure, twisted words to avoid responsibility for his action, perverted "the power of words" by using them as a means of guile and self-deception. Thus, it is aesthetically and psychologically sufficient that, at the tale's conclusion, words are no more of comfort to him, no longer an ephemeral origin of weak power. The last sound in the story is a wordless wail, a daemonic babble of heinous disorder by which the narrator consigns himself to the darkness of a psychic hell. Thus far readers have pointed out mystical elements throughout the story, in the next part, the study will analyze the sociological reasons behind the story [3].

"Is any non-violent solution of struggle possible?" In his "Critique of Violence," Walter Benjamin brings forth this question (2431) [1]. In fact, his reaction is that such a non-violent resolution of conflict is probably in what he calls "relationships among private persons," in courtesy, sympathy and trust: "there is a sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of 'understanding,' language. (245)

This idea of Walter Benjamin is of the central tradition in which the well-known idea of language and the symbolic order is linked with the medium of settlement and mediation, of calm co-existence, as against to a violent medium of immediately and raw encounter. In language, instead of imposing direct violence on each other, we are meant to argue, to exchange words, and this kind of an exchange, even when it is aggressive, supposes a minimum recognition of the other in advance. The entry into language and the renunciation of violence are often discerned as two sides of one and the same gesture: 'Speaking is the foundation and structure of socialization and happens to be characterized by the renunciation of violence,' as a text by Jean-Marie Muller has written for UNESCO tells us. Because man is a 'speaking animal,' this means that the repudiation of violence explicates and determines the very center of being-human: 'it is the principles and methods of non-violence... that constitute the humanity of human beings, the coherence and relevance of moral standards based both on convictions and a sense of responsibility,' so that violence is 'indeed a radical perversion of humanity.' To the extent that language gets corrupted by violence, this occurs under the influence of contingent 'pathological' circumstances which distort the inherent logic of symbolic communication.

What if, however, humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak? When we understand something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the "normal" non-violent circumstance is – and the highest form of violence is the dictation of this criteria concerning which some events emerge as "violent." This is why language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual understanding, preoccupies unconditional violence. So, probably, the fact that reason (ratio) and race have the same root tells us something: language, not primordial vain fascinations, is the first and greatest divider, it is due to language that we and our neighbors (can) "live in different worlds" even when we live on the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not an auxiliary distortion, yet the final resort of every specifically human violence. Take the instance of anti-Semitic pogroms, which can stand in for all racist violence. What the perpetrators of pogroms find intolerable and rage-provoking, what they react to, is not the immediate reality of Jews, however to the image/figure of the 'Jew' which circulates and has been built in their tradition [4].

The catch, of course, is that one single individual cannot distinguish in any simple way between real Jews and their anti-Semitic image: this image over determines the way I experience real Jews themselves and, furthermore, it affects the way Jews experience themselves. What makes a real Jew that an anti-Semite encounters on the street "intolerable," what the anti-Semite tries to destroy when he attacks the Jew, the true target of his fury, is this fantastic dimension.

The same principle applies to every political protest: when workers protest their exploitation, they do not protest a simple reality, but an experience of their real predicament made meaningful through language.

One can have a parallel analysis of the connection between the man and the cat. Like social misunderstanding, and due to a predefined image, which has taken the place of reality, the man wants someone or something to understand his desperately existential reality, therefore the same as fantastic images which are imposed on Jews and define them, the man in this story imposes what he has in mind, he wants the cat to understand him. When he comes home drunkard and, thinking that Pluto is ignoring him, he grabs the cat, which bites him on the hand in fear. In

reaction, the man loses control and cuts one of Pluto's eyes out with a pen-knife. Following sobering up the next morning, he feels a little bit of regret, however, returns to drinking. The cat recovers, nevertheless it conspicuously avoids its owner, who is at first grieved and later annoyed and provoked. He describes it as a primitive impulse of perverseness that drives him to complete his attack on Pluto by hanging the cat from a tree, even if he cries as he does the deed, aware that he has committed a deadly sin on an animal that once loved him.

The violence emerging from the man is like the same worldwide violence befalling nations since they cannot understand each other, or in the worst way possible they impose their symbolic truth on the opposite side only to conclude and find the other side as neither understanding nor perceptive. This way they can justify their way to destroy the other.

III. CONCLUSION

In his essay, Poe's conviction is that a work of fiction should be written only to follow the writer, who decided how it is to finish and which emotional reaction, or "effect," he wishes to create, commonly known as the "unity of effect." Once this influence has been determined, the writer should decide all other matters related to the composition of the work, comprised of tone, theme, setting, characters, conflict, and plot. As in the story, violence might be the effect that Edgar Allen Poe decides to have on the reader, however, in all the way of analysis one might find out that what the reader's face is not a unity of effect but like modernist short stories readers are entangled with suggestions and uncertainties, the same as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf's fictions, this effect is contrary to what Poe intended to have, since what one might see as violence is not a violence but an unreasonable strangeness. Additionally, in analyzing the story further, one can find mystical and biblical reasons behind it. If one takes violence as the effect, one should expatiate upon it, to see invisible things that resulted in its emergence in this story. Apart from the biblical and mystical analyses, one might notice that how symbolic violence happens, cats are like an individual or nation who come under oppression when one pretends that cats do not understand it, and as human being start to impose their own fabricated truth on them only to annihilate them without reason and rob them of their resources. Therefore, the unity of effect is an absolutist phrase, and it is clear that many readers have their interpretation of the works.

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