

EDGAR ALLAN POE: ENIGMA OF HUMAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was born of a poor family and left an orphan with a feeling of loneliness which never left him throughout his life. Poe was away from the ordinary topics handled at the time; he broke with traditional romantic adventure tales to write tales of mental analysis with psychological profundity. His writings reached understanding of some human motives. He adapted the dehumanizing forces of his day and was able to describe the consciousness that gave a picture of man dominated by a sense of anxiety and fear in search for values. He does not see the human individual as they actually exist in space and time.

Though he believes that preaching is not the domain of literature, Poe does not fail to cover it implicitly because the moral touch is part of his belief in the importance of goodness as a principle in art, terrible deeds, he believes, are not matter of ethics but of psychology. His focus on the inner status of the soul as he explores the unconsciousness constitutes part of his modernity which paved the way to the movement of surrealism. Besides, his way of touching upon materialism of the time and the American quest for material betterment help to display him as a modernist writer.

Key words: tale, identity, love, gothic, detective, psychology

1.1 Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) was born of a poor family and left an orphan very early to be raised by a rich family the Allans. There he felt very lonely and this feeling never left him throughout his life.¹ Although the love and care bestowed on him by Mrs. Allan compensated him the motherly love that he missed, Mr. Allan turned out to be one of the reasons for the child's misery in life.² He refused to adopt him legally and stopped in the years to come to pay his debts and to provide him with money.³ So the young man left the house after a quarrel with Mr. Allan. To certain extent Poe was to be blamed for the disconcert of Mr. Allan for engaging in drinking and gambling. But had he given Poe the love a child needs of a father, his life might have changed.

However, Poe tried to find love and security with women, but his experience turned to be a sad and painful failure. After the death of his wife, Virginia, Poe grew neurotic, almost in same, and the feeling of guilt never left him.⁴ He was accused of being impotent, so he flirted with other women to marry a girl of thirteen with whom it was impossible to have a regular relation.⁵ Thus women for Poe symbolized the spring of beauty that was destined to die.

In 1829 Poe published a small volume of poems which marked the beginning of talented youth. He then began to write for the journals but he attracted little attention and he knew that a livelihood by the profession of writing couldn't be had. He was proud of his poverty because, as David M. Rein says, "it was a proof of his honest motive,"⁶ that is, his devotion to literature. He was willing to become even more poor, to surrender the job he had for one with less pay, in order to get more leisure to follow his pursuits⁷ Ironically enough, he could not stick to any job to avoid poverty for his drunkenness, he remained "the traditional starving poet".⁸

Establishing his own magazine was his dream which he was never able to fulfil, although he had some efforts with the *Penn Magazine* and the *Stylus* and later the owner of *Broadway Journal* which failed in 1840 for financial problems.⁹ His longing for fame to compensate the misery he felt in life was behind his bad need for owning a magazine.¹⁰ Indeed it was difficult for him to see that he was nowhere on the American scene with the greatness he felt within himself.

Throughout his literary career Poe approached different fields of literature. He began by writing poetry then turned to short story. He was a critic too. Influenced by the mood of the age he started as a romantic of a type familiar to his age. He knew he ought to write "marketable prose" which means stories for the magazines.¹¹ So writing for the magazines was the only weapon to an American writer to face the flood of cheap plays and novels in the market. Besides, Poe wrote short stories not because he regarded them a great art form but because no other form would be of financial profit, at least this was his attitude at the beginning.¹²

Working in journalism enabled him to recognize the prevailing drift in the reading habits of Americans. Hence in 1840 he declared that "we now demand the light artillery of the intellect; we need ... the condensed, the pointed ... in place of the ... detailed, the voluminous".¹³

His theories, which are alike in poetry and prose, could be called neo-platonic.¹⁴ Poe holds that literary genres express man's highest ideas: poetry is beauty, prose is truth.¹⁵ The combination of both beauty and truth approaches goodness.¹⁶ Poe is the first American to visualize the story as an art form: character and each element are subsidiary to the action as a whole.¹⁷ He believes that literature is best

expressed when it is written in an effective way. In any tale he supports the principles of brevity, totality and single effect.¹⁸ To him art is a deliberate thing. The writer "should write not from his emotions or from his inspiration, but coldly and deliberately from his intellect."¹⁹ He is compared an architect who plans a building, the structure is an essential element because the merit of the tale lies in its being perfectly adapted to its purposes.²⁰ His view is typically Aristotelian, each part is very necessary to the other parts; beginning, middle and end form an unbroken chain."²¹

Poe's second concern, next the structure, is characterization. He invented different kinds of characters, almost flat and undeveloped. They are mainly two dimensional. Then pasts are unknown and some without names. Usually they suffer from mental troubles; the men are often abnormal and desperate and the women are sick and dying. His characters are not the types we meet in real life. They are not a live and they do not move our sympathy. Much stress is given to narrators who are considered part of his characterization.

Poe published sixty-eight tales, within seventeen years from 1832 – 1849.²² These tales are divided into three categories: grotesques, arabesques and ratiocinative. These categories correspond roughly to the early, middle, and later periods of his career.²³

William Howarth describes the grotesques as Poe's "apprentice work".²⁴ They were written between 1831 – 1837. Poe imitated the type of stories that were familiar at the time, the sensational. They were witty and amusing written primarily for the market.

The arabesque were written between 1838 – 1844. They constitute a step forward in Poe's maturity: they are well-constructed and more serious than their predecessors. He used the term arabesque to indicate their fanciful tone and somber meaning, possibly inspired by the *Arabian Nights*²⁵. These tales display Psychological dimensions in their frightful subjects.

The third category in his ratiocinative tales which he produced later in his life, between 1841 – 1845 . they are considered the forerunners of modern detective stories. He differs from earlier writers in providing a problem, a motive and not a mere mystery, the result of which is irritation.²⁶ Poe's tales reveal a gradual unfolding of the solution reflecting a keen analytical and imaginative mind.

However, in his first category of tales, he wrote the gothic theme, which was popular at the time, with insight. In his preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* Poe wrote "if in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germans, but the soul."²⁷

The death in his gothic tales is mainly the death of the spirit. The supernatural and the abnormal are clear in such tales. This mode of writing appealed to his own dispositions, his obsessions and nightmares.

D.H. Lawrence says that Poe, in his work, "sounded the horror of his doom."²⁸ On the other hand, Edward Davidson says that Poe's tales present "certain stages and varieties of what might be termed the romantic consciousness."²⁹ His heroes are often considered to belong to the romantic atmosphere: they have the some inhuman arrogance and self-exaltation that the romantic hero has. The objects of horror says Davidson, are not horrible because a mind sees them as such and is even destroyed by them.³⁰ This is why Poe's horror is described to be psychological, and this is why any critical analysis of such tales should deal with one mind of the "I" or the narrator.

1.2 Poe's reflection on human disintegrated self

The "I" of the story, *The fall of the house of Usher* (1839) is invited to the house of his friend, Roderick Usher, because the latter feels a cute bodily illness and mental disorder which oppressed him. So by the "cheerfulness" of the narrator, Usher will get "some alleviation of his malady". Roderick lives with his twin sister, lady Madeline, with whom he has an incestuous relationship. The house is an antique, gothic – like mansion. Roderick asks the narrator to help his bury his sister who died often being sick for some time. Roderick states that his retention is to preserve the corpse for fortnight in a vault to protect her from the tools of the physicians. But Psychologically, Madeline is kept there to permit Roderick to imagine he hears her struggling to escape from her tomb. If she were buried on the remote family plot, it would be absurd to assume he imagined her digging through the earth. A week later, Roderick undergoes changes in his countenance to reflect his deep sense of guilt, Madeline appears and embraces her brother a deadly embrace. The house falls over them and the narrator flees from the mansion.

The gothic atmosphere pervades the tale from the beginning to the end. The gloom of the house prepares for the unusual happenings. On the night of the catastrophe the whole scenery is dense and gathers around the house like a shroud. The one who can feel the hidden dangers is the narrator. He tells Roderick that the air is chilling and dangerous to his frame. Moreover, the dead vegetation around the house and the parasitic vegetation form part of the evil and destructive life which the house stands for. The vegetation that grows in the house has an affinity with Roderick's wild hair. This is what makes the house "a psychic sponge"³¹ that drains Roderick's vitality and lives on it. It is a "spiritual vampire"³² that can support his life and re-energize his frame by drawn upon the vitality of others instead of feeding upon blood, as most vampires.

The house is designed as a prison. All the windows are in- accessible from within, imprisoning Roderick and Madeline from the outside world. Everything inside seems entombed under its vaulted ceiling. The storm, on the other hand, reflects the psychological turmoil of Roderick and the loud cry of protest by

nature. Nature must defeat the Ushers and destroy the house because the three (Roderick, Madeline and the house) have a common soul.³³

One of Roderick's abnormalities is an acute auditory sense. With his unbalanced mind he confuses the sound that the narrator is reading about to be of his sister's coming back. Roderick is mad. He sees himself in a struggle against a supernatural power. Reading different books to seek knowledge of this power and how to combat it, he tries, with the narrator's help, to identify this invisible foe. He is unable to accept the fact that these threatening powers are outside his imagination.³⁴ For him such sensibility is a family evil for which there is no remedy. Roderick is in complete disintegration: either he is attacked by moods of madness every now and then or he sits in silence and terror.

Everything in the tale is related by the narrator who is described as the "innocent eye" who observes and gives the reader the necessary information, but unable to interpret it. He is affected by the evil spirit that haunts the house. From the first sight the house he is attacked by a gloomy foreboding that is beyond elucidation. On the night of the catastrophe he is haunted by the same depression and terror that Roderick suffer from throughout the tale. His mental balance is distributed by his friend's fantasy. He admits that he is entering Roderick's wild world, while reading to him he hears the same sounds Roderick hears. He is even called "mad man" by Roderick. The reason behind all the disturbance is Madeline who does nothing, on the country, things are done to her. She walks as a ghost in the house.

The tale could be considered as Poe's autobiography.³⁵ Roderick is to be taken as a self-portrait of Poe, illustrating his split personality. His life with his sister is compared with Poe's life with his wife, Virginia, whom he used to call "sis".³⁶ Both have the same feeling, an ambivalent one, of tenderness and hostility. But on a more profound level, the tale could be seen as "a psychic drama" that studies a human self in disintegration.³⁷ Roderick and Madeline could stand for the mind and body that die a unified death. The house functions as the soul which is supposed to be pure that cannot accent such corruption.

However, Poe's inventive mind exceeds gothic tales to what he calls "tales of ratiocination."³⁸ The change was due to personal reasons. In 1840 Poe was dismissed from the editorship of William Burtons *Gentleman's Magazine*.³⁹ So he was ready to accept any appointment. George Graham offered him a new editorship provided that Poe would follow the practical way. As "a creature of extremes"⁴⁰ he accepted the offer to turn from the world of emotions to reason. Thus his detective stories came as an obvious expression of logic. Though he was not the first one to write detective stories, but he had the privilege of creating the detective stories as the modern reader know them. What concerns him in such stories is not the mystery itself, that the detective author seeks to interest his reader, but the mental analysis to solve a problem that

might be considered beyond elucidation.⁴¹ The focus is on the unravelling of the crime rather on the crime itself.⁴² Thus Poe elevated the detective story from a mere adventure tale into a model of human portrayals with Psychological insight.

Poe's ratiocinative stories can be regarded as a continuation of his other stories. In *The murders in the Rue Mongue* (1841) he writes a tale of horror. The story is of two women who are brutally murdered in their apartment in a Paris building. The witnesses all testify that they saw no body entering the building but they did hear two kinds of voices at the time of the crime: one was a Frenchman's and the other was unrecognizable. Here lies the mystery. It is obvious that money is not the motive for the crime. The four thousand francs brought to Mme L' Espanye by the bank clerk, Le Bon, was not stolen.

Auguste Dupin, the hero, an "eccentric and impoverished chevalier", does not appear until the police fail to solve the riddle. He and the narrator spend their time reading and conversing. With his analytical mind Dupin succeeds in tracing the clues that lead to the unravelling of the crime: the greasy ribbon from which he deduces that a sailor has a hand in the crime and the coarse hair clenched in the fingers of the murdered mother, which is not the hair of a human being. Dupin reaches a conclusion that a sailor and an animal are Revolved in the crime.

With his logical reasoning Dupin, the "analyst", as Poe, describes him, realizes that the clues at hand fit an ape. So in an act of mutative his master when he was shaving, the ape committed the crime. Taken from the psychological perspective, the writer tries through the brutality of the ape to reflect the human animalistic thirst for material prosperity. In this Poe paved the way for the idea of absurdity in literature. Man no longer behaves as a reasonable human being, all his actions are linked with to beasts.

Conclusion

Though Poe was neglected and misunderstood in America, he was first appreciated by the French symbolists. It was through Baudelaire's interpretation of Poe's works that he was given recognition. This made it obvious that symbolism started with Poe in America.

Poe broke up with conventions. He was away from the ordinary topics handled at the time. He was above the national scene. *The fall at the house of Usher* is an example of his break with traditional romantic love, what he presents is the incestuous love of a diseased mind that shocked his readers. Even in his detective stories, he elevated the ordinary adventure tales to write tales of mental analysis with psychological profundity, as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* shows. Though he was not yet acquainted with Freud and his contemporaries, yet his writings reached an understanding of some human motives beyond the ordinary human comprehension. In his adaptation of the dehumanizing forces of his day, he was able to

describe the states of the consciousness that gave a picture of man dominated by a sense of anxiety and fear in secret for values.

Hence, his characters are not seen in the light of common day, that is, human individuals as they actually exist in space and time. Besides, there is no obvious moral, for Poe believes that literature is not the domain for preaching, though he does not fail to convey rather implicitly a moral touch. The moral touch is part of his belief in the importance of goodness as a principle in work of art. And the terrible deeds for Poe are not matters of ethics but of psychology as he is haunted by the enigma of human identity. His focus on the inner states of the soul and the motif of human duality, as he explores the unconscious, constitute part of his modernity, which paved the way to the artistic movement of surrealism. Besides, Poe's symbolic way of touching upon the materialism of the time and the American quest for material betterment help to distinguish him as a modernist writer.

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Notes

¹Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Alan Poe* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc, 1980), 13.

²William Bittner, *Poe: a Biography* (London: Elek Books Limited, 1985), 20.

³Ibid, 25.

⁴David Parkin, *Edgar Allan Poe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50.

⁵Ibid, 53.

⁶David M. Rein, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Inner Pattern*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 58.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Harvey Allen, *Israfel: The life and Times Edgar Allan Poe*, (New York: Farrer of Rinchart Inc., 1975), 348.

⁹Buranelli, 30.

¹⁰Edward A. Burn, *Poe: men and Artist* (Boston: University Press, 1990), 25.

¹¹Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American short story* (New York: Hamper and

Brothers publishers, 1950), 22.

¹²Russell Brad, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Oxford: University Press, 1986), 9.

¹³Buranelli, 64 – 5.

¹⁴Parkin, 55.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Burn, 17.

¹⁸Ibid, 19.

¹⁹Pattee, 133.

²⁰Burn, 30.

²¹Ibid, 35.

²²Parkin, 40.

²³Ibid, 45.

²⁴William Howarth, ed. *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales* (New Jersey: Prince-Hall Inc., 1971), 7.

²⁵Ibid, 8.

²⁶Arthur Hobson Quinn, *American Fiction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croffts Inc., 1960), 88.

²⁷Buranelli, 25.

²⁸Antony Beal, ed. *Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Mercury Books, 1961), 346.

²⁹Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1966), 125.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Joseph Praz, "Poe and Psycho analysis in *Literary Kicks*." URL: <http://www.Google.com>. 3/1/2018.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Parkin, 39.

³⁶Ibid, 45.

³⁷Ibid, 30.

³⁸Bill Anderson, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Biography* (New York: University Press, 1983), 30.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Julian Symons, *The Tale Tell Heart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 222.

⁴¹Burn, 50.

⁴²Ibid.

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