

Immolation of the Self, Fall into the Abyss in Edgar Allan Poe's Tales

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's tales offer a variety of instances linked to the analysis of human nature and the processes it goes through during the stories. Most of them treat about the destruction of the self as the narrator finds himself confronted with the darkness that gradually will come to annihilate reason and any sensible thinking. The protagonist witnesses not only the darkness inside, but also the crumbling of the world in a deliberate way of destroying all attempts at reasoning. In these tales the reader faces a transvaluation of values which leads to the description of a world without mercy and compassion. Thus, the article will explore the psychological connotations in some of the tales focussing on symbols like the mask, the fall into the abyss, the dark side of human nature.

Keywords: divided self, self-immolation, space, time, transcendentalism

In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" Edgar Allan Poe states that the artist's primary duty is not to exorcise despair, but rather to present it as the primary psychological response to reality and to render it as faithfully as possible. In a poem like "Ulalume," the imagery alternates between hope and despair. Poe's final resolute vision is that hope deludes and destroys. In the general picture he makes of human psychology Poe sees despair as a correct response to the hopelessness of human life, considering that hope has been driven away once and for all.

Most of Poe's tales follow the same line of interpretation as they analyse the decadence of human nature in limit situations. The tales of Poe stage a narrator who presents the situations from his own point of view, therefore unveiling himself as an unreliable narrator. Many of the tales can be described as a fall into the abyss, a deliberate search for the dark side of the human self. Poe investigates the various instances of self-destruction in different major ways of representation.

In his essay "Self Reliance" Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses the view that "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your mind" (Emerson 40). The transcendentalist doctrine underlines the idea that man can attempt at knowing the universe, and implicitly getting in contact with the Over Soul, if he uses his intellect in the appropriate way. Poe proves to be anti-transcendentalist as he focuses more on the destruction of the self than on its perfection.

One of the ways of analysing self-immolation in Poe's tales is using the interpretation offered by C.G. Jung in his works. According to Jung, the self is divided in three major layers which are the conscious, the subconscious and the shadow. The last one is mostly present in Poe's tales, either in the shape of a psychological manifestation or in the form of a character assuming the role of the murderer / exorcist of the victim. In what are called Poe's murder stories the reader watches the destruction of the self in moral and intellectual terms. In a tale like "The Black Cat"

the narrator identifies Pluto the cat as the source of his anxiety and pain, and the murder taking place is the natural consequence of his involution.

A characteristic of Poe's prose is that the stories don't have an ultimate conclusion; the reader is allowed to form his own opinion about the events in a most modern, open ending technique. Another possible explanation would be, at the level of the text proper, the fact that the narrator himself is no longer able to discern between reality and madness, and this makes the story impossible to have a proper ending. Poe's tales share in several critical topics which should be taken into consideration when interpreting them. One is the way he treats time and space. They change from the background concepts shaping a story to themes characterizing human nature. Time and space contract in such tales, they don't dilate in order to encompass a larger vision of the world. In the transcendental school, time and especially space formed the habitual setting against which the protagonist evolved during the narrative. Time was set either in a familiar epoch to the reader (mostly the contemporary one) or in an allegorical period reflecting on the destiny of 19th century America. Writers like Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Irving followed the classical pattern imposed by the rules of prose. Poe inverts the tradition denying it by transforming time into a nightmare, as the past haunts the present and conditions the future. In tales like "The Black Cat" or "The Fall of the House of Usher" the protagonists live in an eternal past and they are no longer able to distinguish between the temporal lines. The cracks in the walls of Usher's house are not only the signs of his mental decay, but also the influence of the past events over the present and the future state of the protagonist. The temporal dimension is perceived as a fluid entity in which memories mix and form visions that sometimes are not similar to reality. Reality, which Poe defined as inferior to the imagination, is nevertheless the source of events for the narrator who finds himself in places which can sometimes be identified as real. Poe assumes in his tales that the reader understands the implications of his views; he leads him in the direction he wants and then turns around the story by denying almost everything that has been previously said. He transforms "realistic" places into allegorical spaces by offering metaphorical connotations telling of the evil in human nature.

One such example is the story "A Descent into the Maelström." Reminding of the ordeal in the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the narrative tells about the death of a sailor whose ship is caught in the whirl of the Maelström. Apparently, it is just a catastrophe tale inspired from the many sea stories circulating in the epoch. The anonymous sailor relates of the terrible experience he is undergoing, and ironically has also the time to render it to us. Essentially, this is a story about madness and the loss of control over the human potential to recover from limit situations. It is a case study of how the mind is exposed to the evil and temptations of the world. Far from being a moralist, Poe considers that the human mind is not able to face the blows of evil fate and it yields by becoming a toy in the hands of the subconscious.

In his studies of the shadow Jung states that it comes to the surface only when reason completely disappears. Descending, the Maelström involves a gradual loss of mental faculties to the point where the protagonist feels that the walls of water start pressing upon him by becoming narrower and narrower. Inevitable death is not the physical ending (to be expected after a shipwreck), it is the death of the

spirit which no longer finds any point of support in the surrounding reality. Poe subtly reverses the concepts of transcendentalism which insisted on the communion between nature and the human soul. He points out that man is always alone when facing his destiny and that no one is responsible for the fate awaiting him in the end. Fatality and not atheism characterizes Poe's vision, a fatality that pushed him to destroy his own life eventually. Self-destruction presupposes the destruction of the whole universe in an apocalyptic vision.

One of the most significant examples is the tale entitled "The Masque of the Red Death." Playing with the theme of immortality, but also intertextually responding to Boccaccio's "Decameron," the story deconstructs in an eschatological way the image of man as god. It is part of the trend called American Gothic by its generalized theme contained in the words of the narrator: "Darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (Poe 30). The first lines of the tale state that a pestilence has devastated the countryside announcing the apocalyptic vision. Etymologically speaking, the term *apocalypse* stems from the Greek word *apokalapsis* and it literally means *lifting of the veil*, uncovering of a future event. The ball given by Prince Prospero is the reason for which the Red Death appears in the middle of the revellers. Prince Prospero gives the masquerade ball in order to foster communion within the closed and structured group separated from the outside world which was left to take care of itself. Poe reiterates in this tale the concept of a closed, claustrophobic space meant to show the failure and loss of reason in the end. According to the text, the masque was *bizarre*, the setting *wild, fantastic* and *barbaric*, and the western room was *ghastly*. It is not at random that the room of the west is the haunting one. It is the room of the sunset, the place from where darkness falls. It is a ball played in disharmony with the conditions in the realm. It can also be considered a sin of pride against the epidemic ravaging the land because enjoying such a masque angers fate and thus brings the inevitable end. As he is not a moralist in the traditional sense of the word and obviously an anti-Emersonian, Poe deliberately creates bizarre human interactions and situations for the purpose of pushing the reader to ask himself serious moral problems.

Even though Poe was oblivious to questions of morality, sin as a concept is not totally absent from his universe. It is treated in a most ambiguous way as the murderer characters do not register any sense of guilt or of remorse. In "The Black Cat" the narrator declares that he hanged the cat "*because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin – a deadly sin.*" (Poe 24) Such characters consider themselves being above the laws of punishment and retribution, and that is their guilt and eventually the cause of their mental failure. Prince Prospero in "The Masque of the Red Death" believes that he cannot be touched by the disease and he places himself in the position of a powerful divine authority. Man as a god is one of the common themes of Poe's universe, which paradoxically gets him close to Emerson and the concept of the primal man. Prince Prospero attempts at playing the role of a god in his universe, but he fails as he considers that the only defence against death is indifference. Prospero breaches normal expectations of his rank and retreats with a thousand nobles to his abbey. Yet fate catches up with the revellers as when the ebony clock tolls twelve, it is discovered that an unexpected guest is present. The stranger is just the "something rotten in the village" which makes it impossible to continue the merriment even under the protection of the masks. Poe uses the

symbol of the mask with its negative meaning as the mask which cheats and covers a horrible emptiness. Actually, there are three layers of the mask: the one worn by the revellers during the costume ball, another one is the double mask of the stranger, and the third one of the narrator who though a participant in the events manages to escape. The stranger's presence cannot be ignored as it has "gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death" (Poe 30). At the same time his discovery takes place at midnight which in ritual terms is the hour of the ritual punishment. Far from realizing that the coming of the Red Death is a sign of fall, Prospero attempts at regaining order by facing the uninvited guest. His gesture can be interpreted as a last effort of the conscious to keep the balance and not let itself be defeated by the nightmare of the subconscious. Yet, he dies in the process. The death of Prospero can be interpreted as a sacrifice in order to redress the balance in the world. Society is potentially restructured such that the company of nobles can execute the grotesque intruder and return to the external world. Yet, self-destruction happens because the sacrificial murder occurs and Prospero's fall concludes the story. Just like in another story of self-immolation, namely "The Pit and the Pendulum," the space in which the action is located is again of a claustrophobic nature and the descent is actually the confrontation with the demonic nature of man which the protagonist eventually loses. The dungeon's walls referring to the squeezing of the self are comparable to the basement in the house of Usher or the narrative about Pluto. It introduces the theme of self-exploration, ending with the awareness of the protagonist and fear of his own dark deeds and spiritual destruction. Light in Poe's stories is scarce and feeble because symbolically it points towards revelation and resurrection. The seven rooms in Prospero's abbey are a grotesque imitation of the medieval palaces of the aristocracy. Most often Poe prefers the obscurity of sombre buildings, illuminated by the destructive fire. The image of Pluto ruling over the burning house is one of the most powerful instances of self-annihilation in American prose. Light grows dim as protagonists descend the stairs to rational oblivion.

It is in the basement that the ritual death of Fortunato takes place in the tale "The Cask of Amontillado." Poe introduces a new element in his description of murder: humour understood as cynical humour, the pleasure of the murderer to execute his victim. Like in the majority of his narratives, Poe does not mention exactly the nature of the injuries and insults suffered by Montresor from the part of Fortunato. Apparently, the motive for the revenge is the effort of Montresor to respect his family motto: "No one assails me with impunity," meaning "no one can attack me without being punished." Poe does not intend for the reader to sympathise with Montresor because he has been wronged by Fortunato, but rather to judge him and understand the causes of his act. Like in the "Tell Tale Heart," Poe delves again in the workings of a sinister mind. Irony, particularly dramatic irony, occurs when the reader becomes painfully aware of Fortunato's fate even though the character continues to descend in the catacombs with the murderer. Another instance of irony is the fact that Montresor seems to confess his fifty year old crime to some sort of death-bed confessor. The irony is that Montresor does not seem repentant at all, and a proof is that he narrates with plenty of details the murder he has committed. The setting that Poe imagines adds to the murder significance of the story too. Catacombs have always been associated with the dead, they were used for pagan worshipping and human sacrifices. There is a whole tradition of the rituals of

burying someone alive. Such rituals imply that these burials are meant to give a solid basis to a construction so it would not fall to pieces. They are also used to mark the territory of the sacred space by making sacrifices to the gods and by appeasing their possible envy with a human construction. In "The Cask of Amontillado" the situation is reversed as Montresor lures in a most devilish manner Fortunato to his tomb. The devil's temptation plays on the greed of the victim. The thousand injuries Montresor complains of may be nothing but a figment of his imagination, yet he is a man who absorbs perceived insults, brooding over them in silence while he plans some covert diabolical act of revenge: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (Poe 40). The offences Fortunato may have committed against Montresor were not intended as such. The distinction Montresor makes between injury and insult, and his stressing that it was insult rather than mere injury which precipitated him into action seems to suggest that Montresor has suffered, or imagines he has suffered, some sort of public mortification at the hands of Fortunato.

An important element in the decoding of the text is provided by the carnival setting. It is a time of upturning of values, a moment when real values are replaced by false ones when evil comes to the surface. Forgiveness and pity are absent from the carnival world of drunken inversion. Burying Fortunato alive, namely immolating his self in the most concrete way, identifies with the triumph of the forces of darkness in a permanent transgression of all conventions and moral values. In "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe describes one of the most disturbing analyses of the failure of any human perception in the Dionysian setting of the carnival season. Montresor's pleasure in murdering Fortunato in cold blood comes within the range of Dionysian aestheticism. Death inducing pleasure and ritual sacrifices were part of the mythical transgression of human values in the ancient times. An original element in Poe's tale is the fact that he denies the very essence of a carnival which by its nature is a limited reversal of daily conventions. Opposite to the *Red Death*, moral degradation is perceived as permanent as no cure can be found to its spreading. The burial of Fortunato in a catacomb stresses again the predilection of Poe for closed, dark places which symbolically stand for the subconscious haunted by disease and memories. Given the attitude of Montresor during his confession, it is obvious that he feels no remorse and he has no guilt-stricken conscience at all. The story ends with the traditional epitaph: *Rest in peace!* uttered by the narrator. The final irony is not that Fortunato has rested in peace, while Montresor has been punished by guilt, but that the utterance has been suspended or transgressed. Though he feels a temporary sickness of the heart caused by the dampness of the catacombs, Montresor is not feeling pangs of remorse as he is not capable of experiencing guilt or shame at all.

The narrator of this tale carries particular features which dwell on the generalized theme of obsessive human behaviour. Yet, he is not being prodded by the imp of the perverse, as are the narrators in "The Black Cat" or the tale of the same title, "The Imp of the Perverse." The narrator of this tale resembles the character Hop-Frog as one who seeks revenge, but in the case of the latter the reader knows the injury Hop-Frog has suffered and the punishment fits the crime. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" the narrator finds himself incarcerated and tortured by a component of a power structure. The reader cannot know whether or not the

narrator's own assertions that he has committed no crime are accurate. In a way, the story is the inverse of "Hop-Frog." In the latter story, the "little man" wants revenge against the oppressive monarch, while in "The Pit and the Pendulum" he is saved from the power of the state or from divine authority by an unexpected intervention.

There are different instances of narrators /protagonists in Poe's tales. In "The Black Cat," a tale which belongs to the same cluster of stories as "The Cask of Amontillado", he is quite different from Montresor. The narrator of "The Black Cat" is intensely conscious of the problem of good and evil. His very words show that he is tortured by his conscience and that he represents another instance of moral perspective. "And now I was indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere humanity. And a brute beast – whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed- a brute beast to work out for me- for me, a man fashioned in the image of the High God" (Poe 27).

The tale "Hop-Frog" is an instance of the American Gothic which adds another feature to Poe's creation: the grotesque. Poe entitled his volume of prose *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) showing that the former characteristic interested him in a particular way. By its very nature the grotesque refers to the unusual, the hidden aspects of human nature, and it unveils its manifestations mostly in limit situations. The story can be categorized as one of Poe's revenge tales in which the narrator seems to get away without punishment for his deeds. The full title of the tale is "Hop-Frog or the Eight Chained Orangutangs" as the plan of the murderer is to dress his victims in animal clothes and set them on fire on the day of the masquerade ball. The victims are the king of the country and his seven counselors who are in the habit of playing jokes on their servants and humiliate them. The tale functions on the law of retribution as the practical jokers are given a taste of their own habits in the end. Beside the autobiographical elements in the tale (Hop-Frog and Trippetta are kidnapped from their homeland and brought as jesters to the fat king), there is also the interest of Poe in the crippling effects which abuse can have on human nature. Hop-Frog conceives his revenge after he is forced to drink by the king and because the latter throws some of the wine on Trippetta's face. The king's gesture can be seen as offering the appropriate circumstances which trigger the abnormal behavior from the part of the protagonist. It is an instance of the emerging of the shadow or the dark side to the surface of the human self due to the wish of revenge of the narrator. Though the tale ends in a happy way for the two dwarves (they escape through the skylight after the orangoutangs' burning), the terrible deed indicates a breaking of normality and a clinical depression in the case of Hop-Frog. The tale introduces thus the elements of anxiety and despair which lead to murder and madness. Different from Montresor or the narrator in Pluto's tale, Hop-Frog has at least the explanation of having been drunk at the moment he conceived his revenge. Yet, the fall in the abyss is present in his case as well. Ironically, he flies with Trippetta through the skylight while actually his reason plunges in darkness.

In most of the cases the narrators of Poe do not have any compassion feelings for their victims. Mostly they are described when they have already reached the destruction point and the story is the climax of their fall. An exception would be the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" who is only an indirect witness to the decay of his friend. There are two additional elements which are introduced by

Poe in this tale and in another story, namely "William Wilson." They are the mirror and the theme of the double identity.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher" the mirror plays a double game: the one of the dimension on which the self is reflected discovering its dark side and the one of the background for the house itself portraying the abyss it will fall in the end. As an anti-Emersonian Poe does not believe in the transparency of the mirror, but rather he underlines its opacity so there should be no revelation on his tales. Opacity refers to the closing of the self in its own boundaries, the impossibility to undergo any evolution. It is involution which characterizes human nature in this tale. The mirror-lake opening the road to Usher's house has also the role of anticipating the events in the story because the narrator observes the cracks in the building before entering it and remembers them in the end. It is a way of familiarizing the reader with the abnormality ruling over the family and its surroundings. The atmosphere is gloomy and in accordance with the theme. Poe uses an interesting psychological device in his narrative, a device that may be called reversed therapy. In order to calm down Roderick's nerves the narrator reads him from a book which parallels the real story. Yet, instead of curing Usher of his fears, the therapy increases his anxiety by showing him what the end will be. Fighting the dragon in the tale is actually fighting the enemy inside his own mind. Usher is not able to stand this challenge and he will eventually collapse. The thin line between sanity and insanity is crossed by the one who cannot escape the deeds of the past. Moreover, the ambiguity regarding Madeline's death and burial adds to his disease and downfall. The fact that they are twins points to the second important theme of such tales, namely the one of the double identity.

As a clinical illness schizophrenia (or the divided self) is characterized by hallucinations and a mental disorder which keeps the patient in a permanent state of rejection of reality. Madeline's appearance may be an illusion of Roderick's agitated mind and not a phantom coming back to the world. Double identity functions as a test for the character which sometimes projects his desires / illusions / wishes on an exterior person considered responsible for the disease. "William Wilson" is an instance of man haunted by his double or what is called a doppelganger. This entity is a tangible double of a living person which typically represents evil. As dark doubles of individual identities, the doppelgangers prevent people from living a normal life. Different from clinical depression and schizophrenia, the doppelganger is not perceived as a figment of one's imagination, but as a presence threatening the person. One of its consequences is the impossibility of the character to find stability and safety in the world. Man on the run is a specific attitude of the person who is not at ease with his surroundings. William Wilson undergoes a severe form of anxiety culminating in his traveling the world in order to escape the double. Interestingly, no one but the original Wilson notices or comments upon the similarity between the two characters or the frequent imitations of the other. Their connection is private, and the narrator's initial love turns gradually into hate and finally into murder. The narrator claims that he became evil suddenly, yet there is a gradual shift in emotions observed in his deteriorating relationship with the double. The fight in the end between the narrator and the second Wilson is an instance of the mirror technique as the protagonist kills his double, but at the same time murders himself. Assuming the other means to accept the idea of a double identical in aspect and habits. At first

the second Wilson appears to be an instance of the protagonist's conscience as he comes when the first Wilson is about to do an evil deed. Later it is proved that he is not that innocent as he eventually pushes the narrator to his spiritual death. Like in "The Cask of Amontillado" the protagonist is close to his spiritual death and needs to confess in order to ease his conscience. This proves that at the level of the conscious the double has been assimilated because the narrator has found his peace of mind. The fight in the end is like a duel in a mirror as the narrator sees his own dark self in front of him and realizes the darkness of his deeds.

Such tales carry a significant symbolism, namely the one that fatality and deeds condition the existence and integrity of the human self. Poe's characters live in a labyrinth of passions and fears, out of which they sometimes escape but at the cost of their reason. Poe's fascination with the meaning of death initiates interesting lines of inquiry into the fundamental essence of being. Thus, Poe can be considered as believing that everything derives from a single generative substance meant to torment the protagonist in an essentially dualistic world. In his essay "Eureka" Poe asserts the matter of dualism as being essential to the human condition: "We are enabled to perceive Matter as a Means, not as an End. Its purposes are thus seen to have been comprehended in its diffusion, and with the return to Unity these purposes cease." (Poe 53) The tales contain the same idea of assuming identities and mental failure in the process of psychological evolution. Poe's protagonists are not accountable for their deeds, being compelled by profound intuitive reserves within themselves to do what is both an outrage upon life and a salvation from it. Their ethical accountability is what Poe ultimately encourages the reader to think about.

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