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Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville: A Complex Vision

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### Mind Over What Matters?

What matters most in life: Logic, reasoning, and the pursuit of an all-powerful science, or the acceptance of reality and your surroundings that yields its way to nature's course? Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville certainly seemed to have some interesting opinions on the subject. After all, how could these three authors *refrain* from writing about something so fundamental to the human soul? In the pages that follow, we shall take a closer look at some of their shorter works to determine what they might have inferred about logic and reasoning in general and the great struggle of man as he tries to control nature using those same fundamental principles.

#### **The Logically Perverse Mind**

Poe uses the concept of obsessive perversity in many of his short stories, where his narrators seem to mastermind their own gruesome fates. It is very interesting to consider, however, how logically these narrators think through their situations. Each one carefully plans out what should happen or recounts the tale in an orderly and rational manner. Furthermore, they each want us to believe wholeheartedly in their ability to think rationally and act accordingly, which is usually a poorly founded assumption.

“The Raven” is one such story where the narrator uses his own twisted logic to escalate his obsessive sense of self-torture. At the bottom of the third stanza, he logically assumes that the knock at the door is a visitor:

“ ‘Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—

Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;

This it is and nothing more” (Poe 74).

Farther on, he again tries to rationalize the strange noises:

“Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;

Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—

Let my heart be still a moment, and this mystery explore;—

‘Tis the wind and nothing more (Poe 75).

But eventually the spooky situation gets the better of him and he begins to explain things in a not-so-concrete way:

“Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee – by these angels he hath sent thee

Respite – respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore! (Poe 77).

Finally, this disturbed character breaks down and is completely demobilized by his own reasoning. He desperately wants to wallow in his own demise, and so influences his logical conclusions until he has come up with an explanation that warrants his torture.

The narrator in “The Black Cat” also displays his own twisted logic, but not for the purpose of self-torture. Rather, his ends are twofold: to convince us that he is actually a sane individual, and to shift responsibility for his actions from himself to Pluto, his cat. He immediately separates himself from his narrative; instead of allowing us to assume that he (whom we may view as “excitable”) has influenced his recount, he states that he will simply list the facts and allow us to draw our own conclusions:

Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace – some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects (Poe 390).

This, of course, is a boldfaced lie. It is obvious that his tactics are not to discount his own

opinion, but to strengthen it by allowing us to assume he *is* sane, simply because he asserts that he may not be. Once again, the narrator uses a twisted sense of logic to come to the final conclusion that the “monster” he walled up in the tomb actually “seduced” him to murder.

Poe explores this idea of ingrained perverseness a bit more fully in “The Imp of the Perverse.” Our narrator here doesn’t necessarily use his logic to bring about his own demise, rather he begins with demise and tries to justify it. This story is almost identical to “The Black Cat” in purpose, except that our narrator attempts to blame something for an action that he deemed *was* justifiable; in this story he asserts that the only crime committed was the confession which put him away. He begins with very simple situations where his ingrained perverseness may have influence and the situation would be socially forgivable, but slowly builds his case, extending our sympathies *ad nauseam* until his actions become fiendish and we buy it. Stephen Peithman writes:

The Whole tale, then, can be viewed as nothing more than an elaborate, but flawed, defense of his irrational actions, for which he desperately wants to blame something outside himself, as does the narrator of “The Black Cat” (165).

Furthermore, this story highlights the irony of his logic:

The final irony of “The Imp of the Perverse” is that the narrator’s real perversity — morally speaking — is the murder, of which he says little. By all normal standards, the only just thing he does is to confess, yet the narrator plainly regards the murder as fully justified and the *confession* as perverse. Many readers are sucked in by his argument, but there is every likelihood that, unconsciously, he wants to be caught, just as do the narrators of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat.” None of them know why, but something inside acknowledges their crime and demands punishment (167).

Lastly in this set we shall examine “The Cask of Amontillado,” which adds another intriguing element to the mix. This narrator, too, wishes to be caught on the same subconscious

level as he of “The Black Cat” or “The Imp of the Perverse,” but that is not the only focus of his logic. Nay, he does attempt to reason his way into justification of the detestable murder and entombment; but he also plans his murder *very* carefully. Through all the logical fallacies over what should or should not be considered a heinous crime, he makes some supreme choices in his plot against poor Fortunato: Montresor baits him with a wine he knows Fortunato will not refuse; he challenges Fortunato’s pride by declining his expertise for another fool’s help; he plans the murder deep within his catacombs so that he will never be caught (until he confesses); he even repeatedly begs Fortunato to leave the tombs for his own health, subtly elevating Fortunato’s anticipation of the imaginary delicacy.

It is plain to see that Poe makes rational or supposed logical thought central to his stories. From what we have analyzed, it appears that Poe considers logic supremely of the madman. Is this all he has to say? Certainly not. Poe tells many kinds of tales which don’t necessarily involve mad logic.

### **Embracing Your Surroundings**

Two of Poe’s stories in particular involve a character who uses logic to his advantage – but not without a few catches. These are “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “A Descent into the Maelström.” In the former, we begin with a very disoriented prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition. He proceeds to give us a lengthy lecture on how one might perceive death and dreams, but ultimately comes to the realization of his surroundings – a cold, damp, pitch-black chamber. As is mentioned in a note on the side of page 124 in *The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, the narrator uses his logic to trace the wall around, making the “trivial” discovery that his chamber must be fifty yards in circumference. He uses this and other conclusions with his own creative resourcefulness to adapt to his surroundings. Peithman defines this type of narrator:

He is an example of Poe’s “passive” narrators, whose survival in a hostile environment is based

on their willingness to forgo old assumptions and meet a new world on its own terms (124).

Indeed, he does have to renounce his earlier assumption of fifty yards when he finds that he had fallen halfway and reversed direction. These seemingly petty details are what allow him to logically deduce his situation and properly survive in it rather than trying to make the situation bend to his will.

This is almost identical to “A Descent into the Maelström.” The narrator is willing to accept his situation and deal with it as it happens unlike his brothers, who fatally assume that the ship is the safest place to be. Poe also brings to light an ancient Greek concept called *hubris*. Essentially, Poe hints that the narrator and his brothers may be guilty of pride in their assumption that they can control their surroundings with technologies like a watch. Peithman asserts that it is only the narrator who survives because he is the only one who eventually concedes that his predicament is uncontrollable. He “gives up” and begins to think creatively about how he could use his plight rather than fight it.

In these two tales, Poe seems to be saying that man cannot control nature, but must concede to it. Only then can he think reasonably about a solution to his problem. This is very similar to some of the works by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville we will look at a bit later. For now, Poe thrusts two last stories onto the shelf of review.

### **Rational or Supernatural?**

It wouldn't be a Poe collection without something from his dark, morbid occult themes. Poe wrote two stories in particular that we will glance at for their perplexing plots: “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In both of these stories, the narrator tries to choose between a rational explanation and a supernatural one. In both, Poe leaves us confused as to which explanation should fit the story; he challenges us as readers to debate ourselves whether Ligeia came back from the dead or whether unknown forces punished the House of Usher for their sins.

What does this have to do with logic and reason? Plenty. Both stories make us question whether the logical explanations the narrators attempt in either story are worthwhile, or whether we are to believe that the fates of those concerned are decided by a transcendental force that they must accept as foreboding truth. It is the same base principle Poe seemed to assert in the previous two stories, wherein man lost the battle with nature; only to survive as he accepted this loss. Here, we have not two narrators who are willing to succumb to what they see, rather one who is inquisitive unto self-destruction and another who escapes while viewing two characters who live a testament to all that is unnatural, which is conjectured to be their destruction.

### **Control and Alienation of Nature**

We have seen Poe's opinions and rather elaborated him on the subject (although not unto exhaustion – much exists in his realm); but what do Hawthorne and Melville think? To solicit Hawthorne's opinion, let us have a look at "The Birth-mark" to begin. This is the perfect tale of a mad scientist who is endlessly unsatisfied by the flaws in nature's creation. The point of interest here is chiefly Aylmer's desire to be in control of something he cannot – if he were a Poe character, we can only assume *he* would be dead.

Aylmer is an aspiring scientist, and we have every indication that he is a very proficient one, but as soon as he extends his experiments into a domain he has no license to explore, the results can only be adverse. Nancy Bunge says, "he aspires to divinity. He hints that, if he put his mind to it, he could create a human being, invent water to prolong life, and make gold" (28). Of course Poe's concept of omnipotent nature would never allow these to happen, and Hawthorne seems to have paid attention. Bunge continues:

But Aylmer assumes this irrational point of view. After their marriage, he becomes increasingly obsessed with the birthmark, seeing it as a symptom of frailty he must conquer ... This flaw symbolizes the impotence even Aylmer's scientific knowledge cannot circumvent (28).

Yet as we all know, Aylmer attempts what nature cannot allow. He *may* be successful, but not without a heavy price. Kenneth Mark Harris presents this observation about Hawthorne's work, in general:

In his better work Hawthorne almost invariably reveals some unmistakable sign of a character's essential moral state at or near the end of a story, often at the moment of the character's death; furthermore, that final revelation almost always entails a recognition or at least an exposure of evil (15).

Indeed, evil is exposed, but not at the death of the one responsible. When Aylmer's wife collapses, blemish free, she reassures Aylmer that he has done a great thing, and she perished for a noble cause. How can this be the case if she is dead? The assumption is both illogical (again, twisted logic) and dangerously naïve. Both characters' "moral states" are probably "no," as it appears that nature has automatically corrected Aylmer's imbalance (globally, not mentally).

Bunge sums this conclusion up fairly well:

His benighted perspective makes him a failure both as a scientist and as a human being; he kills his wife, first emotionally, then physically. But Georgiana's absorption of Aylmer's point of view shows the power of both science and arrogance; people so yearn to transcend human limits, they will destroy themselves rather than reconcile themselves to imperfection (30).

Similar fates are seen in Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter." Dr. Rappaccini is a scientist cultivating a garden of hybrid plants, but as Bunge notes, plays a symbolic "Adam" role from the Biblical reference:

This garden is the laboratory of Dr. Rappaccini, a sickly-looking scientist whose plants seem to threaten him ... These questions frame the tale, inviting the reader to see it as a parable about the ways people have alienated themselves from nature and each other (67).

Indeed Rappaccini and his rival Baglioni are both alienated from nature as they exchange a childish match of wits. One attempts to dominate the other, and eventually they destroy the love

that could have been between Giovanni and Beatrice. Bunge offers that the tale “focuses on the human tragedy created by intellectual arrogance, merely hinting at the solution Beatrice offers” (71).

Melville adds his two cents with his work “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.” The story is split into two sections, so our attention is initially directed to this “paradise” of bachelors who we eventually see as a jovial bunch of impotent and insignificant men. They may pride themselves in their status, but reality dictates that they are all living petty lives with the guise of social elevation (and physical elevation over the deep valley, a womb for the maids). Dr. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. states:

For personal fulfillment, the bachelor-knights are capable only of turning inward upon themselves, homosexually or autoerotically, instead of outwardly to battles of spiritual conviction (91).

Furthermore, William B. Dillingham notes that Melville implies some of the same points as Boccaccio in his *Decameron*:

... the gaiety of this group escaping the pain of the world, the pleasantness of their surroundings as opposed to the ugliness outside, their good health as opposed to pain and sickness without, and finally their envelopment in an orderly system which allows them variety while protecting them from chaos (184).

(Melville makes this reference apparent when he states that some of the men were “going to their neighboring chambers to turn over the *Decameron* ere retiring for the night” (210).)

When Melville moves down to the Tartarus of Maids, he suddenly becomes a serious critic. Not only have we lost the frivolous commentary on whimsical gaiety, but our entire setting has transformed into what Dillingham perceives as a parallel with Dante’s ninth level of *Inferno*. Bickley offers his commentary on the shifting view:

... the narrator’s symbolic sexual experience on his way to the paper mill (where, Melville puns, as

a “seedsman” he intends to buy envelopes for seed-containers) is an ironic contrast to the physical celibacy as well as the spiritual withdrawal of the bachelors. His symbolical experience also contrasts with the inhuman “mating” of the pale maids to the machines they are forced to serve.

As Melville’s sexual allegory grows more obvious it becomes less playful. The machines seemingly have taken over the sacred reproductive processes themselves from the factory girls; ... In serving as slaves to the wants of the iron animals the maids even become their own executioners, ... (92-93).

We can plainly see that Melville wants us to notice the torturous setting the maids work in and just how that affects them. We may have been able to see that the men were not living productively or “as nature intended,” but we never considered their situation to be disdainful; rather, it was something a reader could jovially ignore. Here, we have a disastrous arrangement that drives Melville’s point home with no chance of ignorance. Melville implies that the bachelors are no better off than the maids, in reality:

Even though the bachelor is hidden away from painful sights like Boccaccio’s revelers escaping the plague of Florence, he is no freer from the enslaving and destructive forces of life than the benedict. He, like all puny victims of the unalterable laws that operate in nature, is at heart but a pale, frightened maid (Dillingham 189).

This symbolism merely serves to announce Melville’s strong-winded opinion. It appears that he also acknowledges the necessity of man to succumb to what nature has in store for him. Each group, the bachelors and the maids, are separated from their natural lives by a man-made logic which attempts to rewrite their duties in life. As a result, we see the bachelors become impotent and revel in their own homosexuality; transversely, the maids become “mated” with the machines they work, suppressing their natural need for love and affection of the opposite sex. They, too, become sterile and eventually die early by the fibers they breathe. Perhaps both the bachelors and maids are best represented in the parallel of Dante’s ninth ring of Hell, as traitors

who betrayed their very Creator for lives they saw more fitting. Bickley notes the more literal interpretation of Melville's tale:

Melville also seems to be specifically warning us that if man permits machines to take over his biological responsibilities, ... may not mechanism someday force him to abdicate moral and social control, too? (93)

### **Logical Conclusions**

Poe writes much on the logically twisted narrator, but in the end, if his reason does not comply with nature, death and doomsday be at his door. Hawthorne also very cleverly pits the hard sciences against natural courses of events, teaching us that one simply cannot alter his surroundings without evoking certain destruction. All three authors make a very strong case for the responsibility of man to be aware of, and furthermore to accept, the surroundings he is given; also to pay close attention to his responsibility as an individual in life, as Melville's work underscores. It seems that they each grasp a very real concept of fate in life and the unknown.

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