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“The Spirit of Perverseness”: Determinism in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe wrote about the nature of humanity in a fashion unlike most of his time. In a Romantic age suffused with Transcendental notions of anthropology, Poe stood as an outlier who was constantly complicating prominent contemporary ideas. Yet, critically, Poe has largely been dealt with as a psychologist rather than a moralist. Prominent Poe scholar Vincent Buranelli went so far as to say, “Poe writes. . . from the standpoint of psychology rather than ethics. It is nearly impossible to condemn sin and crime in Poe’s universe as vices that spring from the rational will of a responsible human being” (73). Buranelli’s point, while compelling, is precisely where the distinction must be made—can Poe’s characters be held morally culpable for their actions? This essay seeks to explore the nuances of that question and will argue that, based on Poe’s religion, literary criticism, and vocabulary, Poe does, indeed, intend moral judgements to be made by his readers. Poe was not didactic by nature, but as Jay L. Halio put it “a moral *undercurrent* [was] not undesirable” to him (23). That being said, an analysis of how Poe’s literary universes operate provides an important key into how Poe viewed morality; in Poe’s universes, inevitable wrongdoing and subsequent retribution exist outside of the controllable realm, rendering Poe’s undercurrent bleakly deterministic.¹

First, to understand Poe properly, one must recognize the way that Poe builds his literary worlds. Buranelli makes a point on this subject that is worth expounding on: he writes, “He [Poe] has created a universe, given it psychological laws without denying the existence of the moral law, and peopled it with characters appropriate to such a universe. Other artists have also created

¹ For definition’s sake, the type of determinism that this essay contends Poe posits is not the extreme kind, which some have taken so far as to argue means that people, absent of free will, cannot be held accountable for their actions. Indeed, this essay argues quite the opposite. Poe’s brand of determinism is characterized by the fact that the external forces in play within man is his own corrupt nature—thus, Poe’s view of man is not that he is wholly absent of free will, but that his will is to do evil.

strange universes where normality does not apply, where the only question is whether they have succeeded artistically. Poe's universe works artistically" (74). This bears some unpacking, for while Buranelli's observation is well-founded, the lens through which he is looking at it might not be the only one or the most accurate. To say that all of Poe's stories exist in one universe would, perhaps, be remiss; more precisely put, Poe creates a separate universe with each story.

Poe's story structure has a profound effect on how his characters behave and how his stories can be read both morally and psychologically. Leonard W. Engel identifies Poe's world-building pattern and, like Buranelli, frames it psychologically. Engel's argument is that Poe's "enclosure device he uses in both tales... sharply focuses on the character and underlines his neurotic state" (140). Engel pinpoints a vocabularic tendency in Poe's stories (specifically "Morella" and "Ligeia") that helps to establish his universes as isolated from reality while, curiously, still placed inside of it. What Engel identifies as "enclosure devices" is anything that closes his characters in – a tryst, a chamber, a house, a cave – effectively shutting them off from reality. He derives this argument from Poe's criticism in which Poe writes, "The close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident:—it has the force of a frame to a picture" ("Philosophy of Composition" 166). Thus, Engel is astute in his observation that acknowledging Poe's use of enclosure is necessary to properly read Poe's stories because this enclosed effect both impacts and underlines the behavior of his characters. With a little reframing, Buranelli and Engel's psychological formulations of Poe's universes can be used to interpret the moral purposes of Poe's works as well.

Having established the isolation of Poe's worlds, a further step must be taken, for some critics have argued Poe to be the literary twin of his narrators, thus assuming them as taking on Poe's voice. This could not be further from the truth; Poe isolates himself from his characters

just as he isolates the stories from reality. James W. Gargano pushed back on many critics, arguing instead that “Poe's narrators possess a character and consciousness distinct from those of their creator. These protagonists... speak their own thoughts and are the dupes of their own passions. In short, Poe understands them far better than they can possibly understand themselves” (177). In essence, Poe is the creator and establisher of the behavior of his characters, but in no way is he represented by their thoughts or actions.

Finally, no proper analysis of Poe's morality can be made without having reviewed Poe's religious beliefs. For Poe, religion plays an underemphasized role in his work, especially regarding the moral identity of it; he has oft been characterized as a staunch atheist, but, on further enquiry, this identification appears to be severely oversimplified. Like so many other aspects of Poe's life, his religious beliefs have been widely speculated on, but scholars have found almost nothing conclusive in their research in regards to what *exactly* he believed. Regardless of where one falls on the matter, though, Poe's works are clearly rife with biblical allusions and religious vocabularic tendencies, especially his controversial prose poem, “Eureka.” In this, he ambitiously discussed the nature of the soul, the body, Nature, and God in one fell swoop and, unsurprisingly, received some criticism for it; he was most harshly criticized as a pantheist when he wrote of God as “...a God, self-existing and alone existing, became all things at once, through dint of his volition, while all things were thus constituted a portion of God” (“Eureka”). Poe took offense to this assumption, deeming it a “misrepresentation” of his work (*Letters* 382). In his own eyes, Poe was obviously some form of a Christian, having grown up religious, but he was not a conventional one by any measure of the word.

Further evidence for the significance of religion in Poe's works can be found in his own critical theory, specifically his theory of aesthetics. Buranelli provides an explanation of Poe's

creative process as such: “What he [Poe] means is that the artist. . . creates his own private universe from the wreckage he has made of the “real” world. . . As God creates the universe from pre-existing atoms, giving it being and meaning through a unified symmetrical structure, just so does the artist play God with the materials at his disposal” (59). Buranelli’s explanation of Poe’s artistic theory is curious in light of Poe’s complicated religious beliefs and gives Engel’s theory of Enclosure even more weight. For Poe, a man whose life was wracked with death, alcoholism, and despair, it would not be a difficult stretch to make to say that his view of God was somewhat skewed; this is further evidenced by his controversial pronouncements in “Eureka.” Yet, Poe viewed himself as the God of the universes that he built, the ones he isolated from reality. This conclusion is significant, for if Poe’s relationship to his stories was purely creator-created, then his stories quite easily can be read as a parallel for how Poe viewed the real-world Creator-created relationship.

Due to the implicit rather than explicit nature of Poe’s morality, one must search for the moral in the subtle nuances of his works. Because he was so intent upon the “unity of effect” of his universes, it follows that it is within the structure of the universe that his undercurrent might be found. Dan Shen argues in his article “Edgar Allan Poe's Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of “The Tell-Tale Heart” that “Although Poe... avoided... explicit moral teaching by an omniscient narrator, he has in some of his tales... implicitly and subtly conveyed a moral through unified structural design” (325). Thus, Poe places the moral undercurrent within the structural design of the universe, making it part of his unifying theme.

“The Black Cat” is an example of a tale that clearly lays the groundwork for Poe’s structural design. The narrative deals directly with the psyche of an unnamed narrator who has

been sentenced to death for the murder of his wife. Consider, again, Engel's model of enclosure—the story takes place almost exclusively inside of a nondescript house between unnamed characters, thus cut off from reality. This is part of the structure of Poe's universes. While one might think in a horror story the details would be centered around the murder and its gruesome details, Poe subverts those preconceived notions. Instead, one might argue the crux of the story is at the point in which the narrator kills his cat, Pluto. In this passage, the narrator identifies his reasoning behind killing the cat as pure perverseness of the human heart, declaring “I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart — one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man” (“Black Cat” 225). While, on first read, one might conclude that the narrator is truly mad despite his insinuations, this passage undermines that reading in that the narrator clearly displays a moral understanding of his actions and provides a reason for them as well.

In the world of Poe, it is not merely the crime that is impulsive and, thus, uncontrolled by the perpetrator, but also the retribution. The narrator in “The Black Cat” is brought to justice by an unlikely occurrence—his “rabid desire to say something easily” (230). The absurdity of this sentence can slip by the reader due to the heightened language, but his pronouncement that the house is “well-constructed” is quite clearly unrelated to the matter at hand, yet it was borne of a “rabid desire” (230). This language closely resembles the earlier impulsive language the narrator described his initial deed as; that is, it would not be a great stretch to say the narrator was seized by the very same sort of impulse. Not only this, but the actual act alone is not what discovers the narrator, but the mewling of the cat he has locked inside. Thus, neither the action nor the consequences of the action were in control of the narrator, but merely impulse and coincidence

led to his detection. Standing alone, this might not hold as much weight, but such a thread weaves its way through Poe's stories: as surely as the crime is impulsive, so, also, is the punishment out of the hands of the perpetrator.

A similar fate is prescribed to the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" when the narrator pulls up the boards in which he had enclosed his victim's body, sure that the police officers could hear the beating of the heart and were "making a mockery of [his] horror" ("Tell-Tale" 306). In fact, the story follows nearly the exact same thread; it exists in an enclosed space (a small house) between unnamed characters, the narrator commits a murder, confesses it, and is found guilty. In his article "Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defense," John Cleman frames both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" as being Poe's responses to the controversial "insanity defense" of the day's legal system. In this discussion, he argues that "the most mysterious, unreasoned, and irresistible act in the story ["The Tell-Tale Heart"] is the act of confession. In this way, Poe inverts or re-deflects the central argument of the insanity defense so that compulsion accounts not for the crime but for the exposure of the crime and its perpetrator" (634). While Cleman's narrow focus, perhaps, limits the breadth of the argument, he is astute in identifying Poe's thread of compulsive confession. While not so explicitly stated, the "perverseness" of Poe's characters might be applied to this narrator, for he parallels the narrator of "The Black Cat" in that he seems to delight in his own wrongdoing.

Poe's characters never provide so explicit a description of the "perverse" as the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" does. This story, again, is a variation on the theme. Similar to the narrator of "The Black Cat," the narrator posits that his murderous deeds were due to a "spirit of the Perverse," saying "Examine these similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the Perverse. We perpetrate them because we feel that we should not.

Beyond or behind this there is no intelligible principle” (“The Imp” 283). Thus, his story unfolds in almost the exact fashion as the previous two discussed. The one distinguishing factor from the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” is that he attributes his confession to a “fit of perversity,” which further enforces the idea that, in Poe’s universes, crime and punishment are one and the same in their uncontrollable nature. Whether it is called a “force,” an “impulse,” or “the spirit of the Perverse,” what each narrator describes is an overarching theme in Poe’s tales of horror.

The characters seeming inability to control their actions or consequences has been identified by scholars before. Joseph J. Moldenhauer writes, “Poe’s protagonists are never ethically accountable to mankind for their deeds, being compelled by profound intuitive reserves within themselves to do that which is at once an outrage upon life and a salvation from life” (297). Moldenhauer posits that Poe’s characters are “compelled by... intuitive reserves,” thus rendered “never ethically accountable to mankind.” Truly, then, Moldenhauer correctly acknowledges the “intuitive reserve.” However, his conclusion is inconsistent with the stories themselves. All three narrators in the murder-confession stories were sentenced to the hangman. Surely, if Poe had intended his characters to be found without ethical guilt, then there would be within the story some clue by which that may be determined. All indicators point, instead, to Poe’s characters being held morally accountable for their actions by way of confession and hanging. Charles Baudelaire comes to a similar conclusion, but more accurately sums up Poe’s force of nature:

Poe has clearly seen, has imperturbably affirmed the natural wickedness of man. There is in man, he says, a mysterious **force** which modern philosophy does not wish to take into consideration; nevertheless, without this nameless **force** (emphasis added), without this primordial bent, a host of human actions will remain unexplained, inexplicable. These

actions are attractive only *because* they are bad or dangerous; they possess the fascination of the abyss. (46-47)

Baudelaire observes the same force that Moldenhauer does, but, rather than concluding Poe's characters morally unaccountable, he argues that this force is merely the affirmation of man's natural wickedness. This conclusion seems to be much more in line with Poe's structure and allows for moral judgement to be made on his characters.

It is the spirit of "perverseness" – the "force" that Baudelaire describes or "intuitive reserve" that Moldenhauer observes – that seems to be the governing theme of Poe's moral tales. Built into the structure of his universes is this ever-present impulse, the impulse upon which man is compelled to act without reason or control. Cleman argues that, for Poe, "perverseness" is a "principle of balancing negation inherent in the nature of existence," and goes further by saying:

Poe's perverseness differs in operation from the theories of his narrators. That is, as set up or explained by the narrators in both "The Imp of the Perverse" and "The Black Cat," perverseness appears to be malign and destructive, but the stories' action demonstrates it to be ultimately beneficent and restorative. The effect seems comparable to the kind of justice achieved in such stories as "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) and "Hop Frog" (1849), not a personal vendetta but a vengeance inherent in the Universe. (639)

This distinction is necessary, for Poe's characters are microcosms acting in his universe; the subtle distinction between Poe's perverseness and the characters description of perverseness is necessary because Poe's unity of design must be taken into account.

The subtleties of Poe's work have largely been lost on most readers and critics—he is not merely a purveyor of the macabre or an artist of art's sake, as various critics have deemed him. Rather, upon closer reading, Poe is profoundly layered in his method, structure, and moral. The

very fact that so many have read him psychologically and overlooked the moral, yet Poe has built into his universes a weighty moral significance. Moldenhauer makes an argument that, perhaps, underlines why this might be the case, writing that “Poe refuses to provide an external vantage point from which the reader can scrutinize the action of the tale and the motivations of its hero. No appeal by the author to the community of ordinary men, with ordinary values, relieves the intense and solipsistic privacy of these works” (297). This, Moldenhauer contends, is why Poe does not intend his characters to be defined by conventional morality. Though, while Moldenhauer’s argument is astute, it is only partially true; Poe does not provide an *explicit* external vantage point for the reader to make moral judgements, but an implicit one exists, and, in fact, Poe invites readers to interpret from it. It is the very structural make up of Poe’s universes that encourages moral reading. Consider that Poe, through methods of enclosure, isolated his stories into their own universes and Poe also considered himself, as artist, the God of his universes; thus, his characters act upon compulsions and forces external to themselves. The irony in Moldenhauer’s statement is that, as he argues that Poe intends the narrators’ “values and psychology [to be] induced in ourselves [the reader],” he entirely misses the external forces at play, the implicit external force being Poe himself (297).

The implication of Poe’s universe construction is that Poe’s moral vision is some form of determinism, for if Poe’s works are read as a divine play in which the reader is immersed, then man’s wickedness is the *modus operandi* upon which the universes hinge. Extracted further, Poe appears to be saying that man is compelled by evil to do evil things for the sake of evil and the inevitable retribution for such acts are uncontrollable. Simply put, Poe as God of his universes appears to parallel Poe’s real-world religious and anthropological predispositions. Cleman argues similarly: “Such a vision, like the arguments underlying the concept of moral insanity, posits a

universe that seems both deterministic and without clear moral order, one in which such stable categories as right and wrong, reason and unreason, are obliterated or, at least, blurred” (639).

Where Cleman observes Poe as deterministic, he observes well. He also assumes Poe’s work to be a projection of God’s will, which is in line with the argument of this essay and with Poe’s universe construction as well. Perhaps, though, he is amiss in positing that Poe blurs the line between “right and wrong.” At least, in arguing this, it precludes a hard stance on Poe’s moral vision; the purpose of a moral undercurrent would be moot if Poe did not intend for judgement to be made. Cleman, perhaps, would have been better to stop simply at the conclusion that Poe’s universe is deterministic, as that is where this essay falls.

Poe’s structure is the unifying external thread out of which his implicit moral can be inferred—that is, Poe as God, perhaps, represents the will and ultimate purpose of God. As Poe’s characters are bound by fate, compelled by perverseness, and called by force to crime and confession, Poe’s moral vision becomes clear, but it is not an optimistic one. Contrary to what one might expect from determinism, Poe’s characters are clearly held ethically accountable for their actions; this fact, perhaps, says more about Poe’s religious and moral beliefs than anything else: man is irreconcilably wicked but is held accountable despite his inability to control his wickedness. Poe’s alleged last words were, “Lord, help my poor soul,” words that could not be more fitting for a man who, quite possibly, viewed the judgement of God as retribution for acts of wickedness far out of his control (Moran to Clemm).

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