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Research Question: To what extent do the short stories *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe focus on the evil side of human nature that remains unchanged by passing time?

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Abstract

In his stories, Edgar Allan Poe revealed the evil side of human nature by emphasizing the ferocity and violence that man can lead into. As history has witnessed the evil side of human nature has remained unchanged by passing time. With that aspect, the stories of Poe in which horror is associated with the feelings like revenge, agony, rancor, jealousy and even with mental illnesses, still retain the validity after a hundred and fifty years. This study analyzes how the short stories *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe focus on the evil side of human nature. All three protagonists cannot forestall their basic drives and surrender to the dark side of their personalities. They commit similar crimes but react in different ways. Initial feeling of triumph is the same for all protagonists; however, their approaches show difference. While the protagonists of *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* cannot endure the burden of murder and confess the crime, the protagonist of *The Cask of Amontillado* cannot hear the voice of his conscience because of the intensity of his jealousy. Also, in this study, the protagonists are compared with figures from recent history such as Hitler, Breivik, Gaddafi and Mubarak to show the unchanging nature of malignancy.

Word Count: 216

Introduction

When history is considered, man has advanced in many aspects. First, he achieved to survive in the middle of the wild life by inventing tools only instinctively. Thousands of years after that man set foot upon the moon and sent satellites to space for different purposes. Now, he has been looking for alternative planets to settle down in case of the possible situation that Earth becomes a place that does not provide living conditions while man carry cell phones that provide instant access to all kinds of information. Besides, he turned a groundbreaking scientific invention into atomic bomb to kill masses. In other words, man has surmounted over nature and has learned to dominate nature. However, he couldn't achieve to surmount his instincts that reveal the evil side of his nature. He has surrendered to the voice of his ego and has let the power to seize him. That power could be the power of money, the power acquired with a certain achievement or the power of a specific position. The reason behind common unrest in societies is also the result of the dominance of man's ego. Man never thinks introspectively and always blames the others; so throughout history the "evil" side of human nature has remained unchanged. It has only altered its form by the changing technology.

Edgar Allan Poe revealed that evil side of human nature so clearly that readers feel the horror of human nature and the imminent ferocity of the end of his stories. In his peculiar way of telling stories anyone can easily perceive the depth of bitterness, which is harmonized with the feelings of revenge and agony. His observations and the way he tells the horror motive in human nature are still valid approximately a hundred and fifty years after he wrote them. His stories are so objective while conveying the horror motives of life that only a minority of people

could dare to write or even confess the extent of evil side of human nature. In his stories he reflects horror as an inevitable consequence of human ego. Most remarkable stories in which, he dealt with horror coldheartly, are *The Black Cat*, *Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amontillado*. All of them are written in first person narration so have the tone of self-judgment. After committing crime all three protagonist feel the sweetness of triumph. However, in *The Black Cat*, the protagonist kills his beloved cat and his wife while the protagonist of *Tell-Tale Heart* kills an old man. Both experience the dilemma between the evil instincts of human nature and conscience in which conscience conquers. On the other hand, the protagonist of *The Cask of Amontillado* cannot hear the voice of his conscience because of the intensity of his feelings, his rancor and his jealousy.

The Black Cat

The Black Cat is a story of a man who tries to unburden his soul by telling the destruction process of his household which is gradually caused by him. Throughout the story, he associates the horror he expresses with his changing disposition and defines it as “disease”. He lives with birds, goldfish, a fine dog, a small monkey, rabbits and a giant cat; Pluto. He describes animals like objects people use or ill-use as does him. Pluto is his favourite; however, with his changing disposition, he carves one of its eyes out with a penknife and terrifyingly he tells that moment in a cold-blooded and even apathetic tone. All he feels is equivocal feeling of horror; at the same time he feels the remorse of guilt and calmness of an untouched soul. He associates soul with the good, innocent side of man that is responsible for benevolence, conscience and unconditional love whereas he considers material body and flesh as primitive instincts without emotions or in other words “id” of human being. According to Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory of Personality, id is the unconscious part of the personality that is responsible for basic drives and based on pleasures.¹ So id has no judgement or distinguishing mechanism between good and bad. That is why he assumes that his soul is still innocent, as if it’s just instincts that trigger the action of horror. He is just a human being and horror is a part of it. He describes that as; “*Yet 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*”. (Poe,230)

¹ Rycroft, Charles (1968). *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*.

The real conflict begins after he kills the cat and loses all of his possessions in a fire. Now he is in despair and starts to question what has happened so far. He feels the terror when he sees the “hung cat shaped wall”, the only wall still remained standing after the fire. The italic use of some words like “because, bas relief, dread, brute beast and excellently” also emphasizes his inner conflicts and may be interpreted as his fore coming sense of conscience. Also, the repetition of the word “because” implies his endeavour of explaining what is happening around him and how things change gradually in his household.

One day, a black cat similar to Pluto follows him home and then it becomes a part of the so-called family. However, different than Pluto, it always keeps following the man and never lets him alone; it may be interpreted as his conscience. That could also explain why he has a deep feeling of aversion toward the animal and why he ignores the cat. He actually tries to ignore the voice of his conscience. In an inevitable way the new cat reminds him of Pluto and how he has surrendered to the sudden terror impulses that come from the depths of his human side. Day by the day “*evil thoughts become my [his] sole intimates*” (Poe,234) and he nourishes such an aversion to “*all things and all mankind*” that he eventually kills his wife. There is no sign of resentment or regret in his attitude toward the chain of horrific events and behind that the destruction of his entire life by himself; contrarily he maintains his cold-blooded attitude. When it comes to conceal the body of his wife, he thinks about each potential plan detailed with the perfectionist approach of a criminal. The most frightening part of his story is his awareness; he is aware of what he has done and how evil his actions are. However, he doesn’t perceive them as wrong, he tries to vindicate himself by coming up with reasonable excuses for his despicable actions.

His most powerful excuse has always been his changing disposition that guides his thoughts and even actions involuntarily. Besides his changing disposition, he contains contrasts in his personality. At the very beginning of the story, he describes himself as “*the most wild, yet most homely*”. (Poe,228) He even mentions God as “*the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God*”. (Poe,231) It can be interpreted that his inner conflicts and contradictions of his personality are also reflected to his faith in religion. He also explains the sudden outburst of confession with the protection of God in the line “*But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-fiend!*”. (Poe,236) From these words it can also be thought that the reason of his fore coming conscience is his hidden faith in God. On the other hand he doesn't show any significant sign of grief when he says “*slept even with the burden of murder upon my [his] soul!*” (Poe,236) he expresses that the burden he feels is the result of the possibility of getting arrested. Rather than the guilty conscience, all he feels is a “*blissful sense of relief*”(Poe,235) or extreme happiness. He summarizes his feelings with the words: “*The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little.*”(Poe,236) Latterly, he confesses his crime in forms of an out bursting remorse that hides in the depth of his subconscious. Therefore, he still feels “*half of horror and half of triumph*”.(Poe,237)

The protagonist of *The Black Cat* portrays a man who gives harm to the ones he loves most. Pluto is so special for him that he doesn't even share the love or caring of Pluto with his wife. Nevertheless, he doesn't hesitate to carve its eyes or to kill it. In that point of view the protagonist could be associated with Adolf Hitler. Hitler is known as a leader who destroyed many lives and families to praise the Arian race. Actually just like the protagonist of *The Black Cat* he gave harm to his people while

trying to preserve their welfare. As known from history, he didn't endure the consequences of his actions. When the Soviet forces invaded Berlin, he didn't accept defeat and committed suicide with his wife. However, the protagonist of *The Black Cat* yields to the voice of his conscience and confesses everything. He is also punished by law and endures the consequences of his actions.

The Tell-Tale Heart

Another story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Tell-Tale Heart* involves the conflicts of a man who kills an old man and judges himself. The protagonist tells the night he kills the old man in a self-questioning tone. From the beginning of the story he repeats how cautious and thoughtful he is toward the old man. He is even slightly proud of himself for being that nice to the man. It also means that he feels the necessity to tell all these and to prove his considerate heart. Actually he tries to vindicate himself to get rid of his guilty conscience. In fact, it could also be interpreted that there is a kind of inner conflict he cannot overcome. He tries to prove that he is not mad as if there is someone needs to be reassured about it. He expresses himself as a wise, calm and gentle person or at least he tries to convince himself. He is the symbol of those who speak louder to make themselves believe in their own lies. Meanwhile, he starts telling the story with the word “*TRUE!*”.(Poe,267) That can be interpreted as a way of self-confirmation but also it is written with capital letters, which could stand for a cry or sudden outburst of a certain feeling. The way he treats the old man is also proven with words “*You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded--with what caution--with what foresight--with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him.*”(Poe,267) He is trying to comfort the old man in an ironic way. For not disturbing the old man, he opens the door gently and moves slowly through the room. But ironically the protagonist has already intended to kill the old man. Actually, he explains it by stating that the only reason he has wanted to kill that man is the eyes of the man. He even mentions that the old man is quite kind and good tempered. He defines those eyes as “vulture eyes” and explains

why he gives that name to the eyes of the man as *“Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees--very gradually--I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.”*(Poe,267) He also emphasizes how careful and clever he is. He shows the acuteness of his senses to disclaim the possibility of being mad. His detailed observations and pre-planned strategy also support that. For a week he keeps going to the house of the old man to get familiar with the routine of the man’s life. He has even thought about the concealment of corps beforehand, which is an evidence for his obsessiveness in details; for instance he waits for the exact planned time to kill the old man. He also shows fastidiousness as being sarcastic and making the sound of *“ha! ha!”* when there is no blood stain or any kind of evidence left over. He could make that sound because of two reasons he could either be in shock after the murder or he could be so proud of himself because of being cautious about details. Although his plan works like a ticking clock, he is nervous especially after he senses the *“uncontrollable terror”* in the middle of the dreadful silence. Also, the frequent use of the exclamation mark could indicate the anxiety of the protagonist. He confesses his crime. Despite all those tactics and cautiousness, it is obvious, from the beginning of the story that he feels guilty and surrenders to his conscience. Actually, he is aware of behaving with his individual instincts. That is why he tries to convince himself that he is not that bad by referring his good temper.

The protagonist could be associated with Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik from recent history. Breivik is responsible for two distinct attacks and the death of seventy-seven people, most of whom are teenagers. After being arrested, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and that caused him to imagine himself as a regent.

Nobody diagnoses the protagonist of *The Tell-Tale Heart* with a mental disease, but he always tries to reassure himself about not having a disturbed psyche. After all, he confesses his crime as Breivik did. However, he confesses it by yielding to his conscience while Breivik confessed it under arrest.

The Cask of Amontillado

In *The Cask of Amontillado* the protagonist Montresor who kills his friend Fortunato with the feeling of revenge has no justifiable excuse to do so but complains about an assault on his name, yet without evidence. As can be inferred the assault on his name is a pretext to cover his jealousy of Fortunato. Jealousy is an indispensable part of human nature. Also, in all religions it is accepted as one of the biggest sins. Like all other instincts that are a part of human ego, jealousy is also hard to forestall. Because, for human beings it is definitely hard to think introspectively when there is an option of blaming others for the failures in their lives. The protagonist of *The Cask of Amontillado*, Montresor is a remarkable example of that kind of people who act with their primitive intuitions. Since, it is actually hard to resist against his instincts and emotions, he is not one of those people who struggle to suppress their feelings. Instead, with a significant composure he plans to kill his old friend. As an old friend Montresor whose name recalls the image of a “monster” knows the weakest point of Fortunato who is ironically the “fortunate” and prides “himself on his connoisseurship in wine”. He also knows the allergy of Fortunato to nitre. That is why he beguiles Fortunato with the idea of tasting Amontillado that is stored in his damp vaults in the catacombs. Actually he behaves in a kind and thoughtful way to his friend and he is quite persistent about warning his friend. He repeatedly offers him to go back; and he says “ *we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible.*” (Poe,246) These words may sound as the words of a concerned friend, but actually he emphasizes that Fortunato has everything he has lost. He is just a simple man who takes others liable

for his failures in life just because they have things he wants to own but has lost. Evidently Fortunato considers Montresor's warnings being proud of himself and his reputable position in the society, that's why, happy to be overestimated wants to prove his connoisseurship in wine and does not refrain from going down. Thus Montresor devilishly teases Fortunato and eases his way down the catacombs. Finally he pushes Fortunato in an alcove and chains him to kill Fortunato and builds a wall in front of him with that feeling of revenge and jealousy. His desire to take revenge is so strong that it turns into cruelty. He doesn't directly kill Fortunato but tortures by confining him in a vault in which he hardly breathes and dies not due to the lack of air but out of the fear of understanding what Montresor has done to him. The most terrifying aspect is the satisfaction that Montresor feels besides his cold blooded and apathetic tone. Montresor is a great example of how human nature is primitively evil. Also the bitter laughter of Fortunato conveys the sarcasm of the situation. It is not only a treachery to an old friend but it also brings up the question What kind of an aversion can make a human being so pitiless as this?

Montresor is such a self-centered person that he even ventures to kill one of his friends. By considering that he can be associated with the autocratic African leaders who have currently cause unrest in their countries such as Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi. Both leaders are known as dictators who have been attacking to their own people only to keep the power in their hands without any acceptable reason but to sustain their personal wealth and retain their powers. In 2009, the forth president of Egypt, Mubarak was ranked as World's twentieth worst dictator on the list of Parade Magazine. After his thirty years of reign, the personal wealth of his family is estimated to be between forty to seventy billion dollars while most of his

people are not literate and the ones who have university degree have no hope to find any kind of job in the country.² It is also noted that in 2009, 21.8 percent of the population lived below poverty level, which is two dollars per day.³ Another example that is as unacceptable and as selfish as Mubarak or Montresor could be given as Muammar Gaddafi. Similar to Mubarak, Gaddafi also had a military background. However, he chose the way to use his knowledge in that aspect to increase his power and personal wealth instead of developing his country. While living in luxury, he promoted the idea of Islamic Socialism. On February 2011, Libyans upraised against the Gaddafi government and won the Battle of Tripoli. Now, even though Gaddafi is dead, unrest is still going on. When these examples of leaders from recent history are considered, the selfish side of human nature is revealed again. Man is such an egocentric creature that once it gets over the boundaries, he cannot thwart the evil side hidden in his personality to show himself and eventually he can even destroy masses without solid reasons. It is hard to distinguish between the death of Fortunato and the death of all those innocent people in civil wars. They both die for the welfare or in other words the dark egoism of the more powerful one who wants to sustain his powerful state.

² <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/egypt-mubarak-family-accumulated-wealth-days-military/story?id=12821073>.

³ <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/500386>

Conclusion

Ferocity and violence are parts of human nature and hard to thwart. However, some people try to forestall their basic drives and achieve to control their dark side. Whereas, others either cannot control their drives or even don't try to resist against their instincts. This group of people is named as maleficent people in society. Actually, when considered more deeply it is revealed that these people are the ones who have surrendered in their egos. That evil side of human nature has never changed throughout history. The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amontillado* with distinct characteristics of protagonists, are examples of that aspect of human nature. At the first sight, all three protagonists experience similar inner conflicts, which are the reflections of the struggle between their ids and superegos. According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, id is a part of personality that triggers the basic drives while superego is responsible for social morals and conscience. The protagonist of *The Black Cat* is a kind of man who doesn't admit his inner voice of conscience till the end of the story. He has always excuses about what he has done to his family and himself but at the end he becomes the one who confesses his crime. With that aspect *The Tell-Tale Heart* is similar to *The Black Cat*; the protagonist confesses the murder of the old man by yielding to his conscience. However, different than *The Black Cat* throughout the story, the protagonist expresses his conflicts and the struggle inside his mind. He has the determinacy of a perfectionist criminal but at the same time he is always questioning himself about being mad. Terrifyingly, he behaves in a kind and thoughtful way toward the old man like the way Montresor in *The Cask of Amontillado* behaves toward Fortunato.

The protagonist of *The Black Cat* and historic maleficent figure Hitler have the same characteristics. Hitler is known with what he did to Jewish people for the sake of Arian race and how those actions were far away from humaneness. Whereas, the protagonist of *The Black Cat* carves one an eye of his cat out and then kills him. Both gave harm to the ones they love at most while trying to preserve them. On the other hand, people like Breivik or the protagonist of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, kill innocent people they even don't care about. Breivik killed seventy-seven people as an attack to the ideology of the government while the protagonist of *The Tell-Tale Heart* kills an old man by showing the vulture eyes of old man as a reason.

Besides these examples of maleficent people who kill innocent ones. Some people could get so blind with their goals and self-profits that they can never hear the voice of their conscience. The protagonist of *The Cask of Amontillado* is a remarkable example of that. Similar to other protagonists, Montresor is also a meticulous one. He has thought detailed about the murder of an old friend. He shapes his plans by considering the weaknesses of Fortunato such as his allergy to nitre. He trapped and killed his old friend coldheartly by yielding his feeling of jealousy. It is such an invincible rancor that Montresor feels to Fortunato. From recent history African leaders Mubarak and Gaddafi could be given as examples of that kind of egocentric maleficent people. Both in Egypt and Libya, people have upraised against current governments. Both leaders have controlled people by using violence. Mubarak is considered as one of the greatest dictators who reigned for thirty years and while trying to escape from his people, Gaddafi was killed by a rebel. Two leaders are similar to the protagonist of *The Cask of Amontillado* by their egocentric sides. All

three have the blindness to crush each obstacle on their ways, it doesn't matter if it is a human being or masses fighting for freedom.

The evil side of human nature has remained unchanged throughout history. It shows similar characteristics in the personalities of the protagonists of the short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe nearly a hundred and fifty years ago with the characteristics of historic figures such as Hitler, Gaddafi and Mubarak or recent terrorist images like Breivik.

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