EDGAR ALLAN POE CRITICAL THEORY ANALYSIS-A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction cannot be conveyed fully in a short introduction. Though he is best known for his classics of gothic horror such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" and his portraits of madmen and grotesques such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado," he is also the author of detective stories, "The Purloined Letter"; science fiction, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym; parodies, "The Premature Burial"; satires, "The Man That Was Used Up"; social and political fiction, The story is relatively simple in its outline, though interestingly complicated by its frame. In the frame, the narrator visits a remote region of Norway to look upon the famous maelstrom, an actual phenomenon described in contemporary reference books that were Poe's sources. There, he encounters an apparently retired fisherman, who guides him to a view of the whirlpool and who then tells the story of how he survived being caught in it. In the main body of the story, the guide explains how a sudden hurricane and a stopped watch caused him and his two brothers to be caught by the maelstrom as they attempted to return from a routine, if risky, fishing trip. "The Purloined Letter," one of Poe's best detective stories, places a greater emphasis on the nature and importance of intelligence, while still pointing at mysteries of human character. This story first appeared in two magazine versions in 1844: a shorter version in Chamber's Edinburgh Journal The nature of this disagreement is not explained, but the story takes place in nineteenth century Paris, and Dupin's actions seem to support the royal family against a rebellious politician. Dupin, in leaving a disguised substitute for the regained letter, has arranged for the minister's fall from power and may even have endangered his life.

KEYWORDS- Edgar Allan Poe's, the Cask of Amontillado, the Tell-Tale Heart, Maelstrom.

INTROSUCTION

The variety of **Edgar Allan Poe's short** fiction cannot be conveyed fully in a short introduction. Though he is best known for his classics of gothic horror such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" and his portraits of madmen and grotesques such **as "The Tell-Tale Heart"** and **"The Cask of Amontillado,"** he is also the author of detective stories, "The Purloined Letter"; science fiction, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym; parodies, "The Premature Burial"; satires, "The Man That Was Used Up"; social and political fiction,

"The System of **Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether";** and a variety of kinds of humor, "Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences" and "Hop-Frog."

Three stories that illustrate some of this variety while offering insight into Poe's characteristic themes are "**A Descent into the Maelström,"** "The Purloined Letter," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Among Poe's central themes is an emphasis on the mysteries of the self, of others, of nature, and of the universe.

His stories usually function in part to undercut the kinds of easy optimism and certainty that were characteristic of popular thought in his time.

"A Descent into the Maelström"

"A Descent into the Maelström," which first appeared in Graham's Magazine in May, 1841, and was collected in Tales, opens with a declaration of mystery: "The ways of God in Nature, as in Providence, are not as our ways; nor are the models that we frame any way commensurate to the vastness, profundity, and unsearchableness of His works, which have a depth in them greater than the well of Democritus."

In using this epigraph, slightly altered from the seventeenth century English essayist Joseph Glanvill, Poe announces several motifs for the story that follows. One of these is the mystery of how God acts and, therefore, may be revealed in nature.

Another is inadequacy of humanly devised models for explaining nature or God's presence in nature. Yet another is the idea of the multiple senses of depth, not merely the physical depth of a well or a maelstrom, but also the metaphorical depths of a mystery, of God, of nature, of God's manifestation in nature.

The story is relatively simple in its outline, though interestingly complicated by its frame. In the frame, the narrator visits a remote region of Norway to look upon the famous maelstrom, an actual phenomenon described in contemporary reference books that were Poe's sources.

There, he encounters an apparently retired fisherman, who guides him to a view of the whirlpool and who then tells the story of how he survived being caught in it. In the main body of the story, the guide explains how a sudden hurricane and a stopped watch caused him and his two brothers to be caught by the maelstrom as they attempted to return from a routine, if risky, fishing trip.

He explains what the experience was like and how he managed to survive even though his boat and his brothers were lost. Poe carefully arranges the frame and the fisherman's narration to emphasize his themes.

The frame narrator is a somewhat comic character. The guide leads him to what he calls a little cliff and calmly leans over its edge to point out the sights, but the narrator is terrified by the cliff itself:

"In truth so deeply was I excited by the perilous position of my companion, that I fell at full length upon the ground, clung to the shrubs around me, and dared not even glance upward at the sky while I struggled in vain to divest myself of the idea that the very foundations of the mountain were in danger from the fury of the winds."

On one level this is high comedy. The narrator professes to be worried about his companion's safety but cannot help revealing that he is personally terrified, and his resulting posture contrasts humorously with the equanimity of his guide. On another level, however, Poe is also suggesting at least two serious ideas.

The narrator's description of the cliff, with its sheer drop of sixteen hundred feet, should remind most readers that in a strong wind, they would feel and behave much the same as the narrator. This realization makes the next idea even more significant: The pose the narrator has adopted is pointedly a pose of worship drawn from the Old Testament of the Bible. The narrator abases himself full-length, not daring to look up while clinging to the earth.

He behaves as if he is in the presence of God, and this is before the tide turns and the maelstrom forms. The tame scene evokes in the narrator the awe of a mortal in a god's presence; when he sees the maelstrom, he feels he is looking into the heart of awesome, divine mystery.

When the maelstrom forms, when the earth really trembles and the sea boils and the heavens shout and the guide asks him what he sees and hears, he replies, "this can be nothing else than the great whirlpool of the **Maelström."**

The narrator continues to see it as a more than natural phenomenon. Unable to accept the naturalistic account of it offered by the **Encyclopædia Britannica,** he is drawn instead by the power that it exerts over his imagination to see it as a manifestation of occult powers, an eruption of supernatural power into the natural world. This view forms the context within which the guide tells his tale.

An important feature of the guide's story is the contrast between his sense of chaotic threat and his repeated perceptions that suggest an ordered purpose within this chaos. It almost seems at times as if the episode were designed to teach the fisherman a lesson that he would then pass on through the narrator to the reader, though conveying a simple moral seems not to be the fisherman's purpose.

For the fisherman, it was good fortune, assisted perhaps by a kind Providence, that allowed him to find a means of escape once his fishing boat had been sucked into the gigantic whirlpool and had begun its gradual descent toward the rushing foam at the bottom of the funnel of water.

The main sign of design in these events is that just as the boat is blown into the whirlpool by the sudden and violent hurricane, a circle opens in the black clouds, revealing a bright moon that illuminates the scene of terror. This event makes the weather into a symmetrical picture:

An inverted funnel of clouds ascending to an opening where the moon appears, over a funnel of whirling seawater descending into an obscured opening where a rainbow appears, "like that narrow and tottering bridge which Musselmen say is the only pathway between Time and Eternity."

This view of a tremendous overarching cosmic order composing a scene of mortal chaos produces other kinds of order that help to save the fisherman.

Bewitched by the beauty that he sees in this scene, the fisherman, like the narrator on the cliff-top, gains control of himself, loses his fear, and begins to look around, merely for the sake of enjoying it**: "I began to reflect**

how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power."

Studying the beauty, he regains his self-possession, and in possession of his faculties, no longer terrified, he begins to understand how the whirlpool works, and he learns that different shapes and sizes of objects descend its sides at different rates.

Attaching himself to a cylindrical barrel, he slows his descent enough that instead of going to the bottom and so across the mystical bridge he envisions there, he is borne up until the maelstrom stops and he finds himself again in comparatively calm water.

For the fisherman, his narrow escape is a tale of wonder, luck, and divine mercy. For the reader, however, carefully prepared by the narrator and supported by elements in the fisherman's story upon which he does not comment, the story also illustrates the inscrutability of the God that may be visible in nature.

This is not a God who operates nature solely for human benefit, though He has given humanity reason, aesthetic sense, and the power of faith that can allow people to survive in, and even enjoy, the terrors of nature.

The fisherman's brother, who survives the onslaught of the storm to experience the maelstrom with him, is never able to move by means of faith or the appreciation of beauty beyond his terror; this makes his despair at impending death insuperable, so he cannot discover a way of escape or even attempt the one offered by the fisherman.

Though not necessarily unique in this respect, the United States has throughout its history been a nation where large groups of people tended to assume that they had discovered the one truth that explained the universe and history and where it seemed easy to believe that a benevolent God had designed a manifest destiny for the nation and, perhaps, for humankind as a whole if led by American thought. Poe was among those who distrusted such thinking deeply.

"A Descent into the Maelström" is one of many Poe stories in which part of the effect is to undercut such assumptions in his readers by emphasizing the mysteries of nature and the inadequacy of human ideas to encompass them, much less encompass the divinity of which nature might be a manifestation.

THE PURLOINED LETTER

While "A Descent into the Maelström" emphasizes the inadequacy of human intelligence to comprehend God's purposes in the universe, it also emphasizes the crucial importance of people using what intelligence they have to find truth and beauty in nature and experience.

"The Purloined Letter," one of Poe's best detective stories, places a greater emphasis on the nature and importance of intelligence, while still pointing at mysteries of human character. This story first appeared in two magazine versions in **1844:** a shorter version in Chamber's Edinburgh Journal and what has become the final version in The Gift. It was then collected in Tales.

The narrator and his friend C. Auguste Dupin are smoking and meditating in Dupin's darkened library, when they are interrupted by the comical Monsieur G the prefect of the Paris police.

The prefect tries to pretend that he is merely paying a friendly call, but he cannot help making it clear that he has come to Dupin with a troubling problem. He eventually explains that the Minister D has managed, in the presence of an important lady, presumably the queen, to steal from her a compromising letter with which he might damage her severely by showing it to her husband.

He has since been using the threat of revealing the letter to coerce the queen's cooperation in influencing policy. As the prefect repeats, to Dupin's delight, getting the letter back without publicity ought to be simple for an expert policeman. One merely finds where it is hidden and takes it back.

The letter must be within easy reach of the minister to be useful, and so by minute searching of his home and by having a pretended thief waylay him, the letter should surely be found. All these things have been done with great care, and the letter has not been found. The prefect is stumped. Dupin's advice is to search again.

A few weeks later, the prefect returns, still without success. Dupin then manipulates the prefect into declaring what he would pay to regain the letter, instructs him to write Dupin a check for that amount, and gives him the letter.

The prefect is so astonished and gratified that he runs from the house, not even bothering to ask how Dupin has managed this feat.

The second half of the story consists of Dupin's explanation to the narrator, with a joke or two at the prefect's expense, of how he found and obtained the letter. As in Dupin's other cases, notably the famous

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the solution involves a rigorous and seemingly miraculous application of rationality to the problem. Although in these stories Poe was establishing conventions for detection and stories about it that would flower richly in Arthur Conan Doyle's tales of Sherlock Holmes, the principles upon which Dupin works are slightly but significantly different from Holmes's principles.

One key difference is the importance of poetic imagination to the process. Most of Dupin's explanation of his procedure has to do with how one goes about estimating the character and ability of one's opponent, for understanding what the criminal may do is ultimately more important to a solution than successful deduction.

It requires a kind of poet to penetrate the criminal's mind, a "mere" mathematician can make competent deductions from given ideas, as the prefect has done. It takes a combination of poet and mathematician in short, Dupin to solve such a crime dependably.

The prefect has greatly underestimated the minister because he is known to be a poet and the prefect believes poets are fools. Dupin says that the police often fail because they assume that the criminal's intelligence mirrors their own, and therefore over-or underestimate the criminal's ability.

Having established that the minister is a very cunning opponent who will successfully imagine the police response to his theft, Dupin is able to deduce quite precisely how the minister will hide the letter, by placing it very conspicuously, so as not to appear hidden at all, and by disguising it. Dupin's deduction proves exactly right, and by some careful plotting, he is able to locate and regain it.

The two main portions of the story, presenting the problem and the solution, illustrate the nature and powers of human reason. The end of the story emphasizes mystery by raising questions about morality.

While reason is a powerful instrument for solving problems and bringing about actions in the world, and solving problems is a satisfying kind of activity that makes Dupin feel proud and virtuous, his detecting occurs in a morally ambiguous world. The end of the story calls attention repeatedly to the relationship between Dupin and the Minister D, a final quotation from a play even hinting that they could be brothers, though there is no other evidence that this is the case. Dupin claims intimate acquaintance and frequent association with the minister; indeed, these are the foundation of his inferences about the man's character and ability. They disagree, however, politically.

The nature of this disagreement is not explained, but the story takes place in nineteenth century Paris, and Dupin's actions seem to support the royal family against a rebellious politician. Dupin, in leaving a disguised substitute for the regained letter, has arranged for the minister's fall from power and may even have endangered his life.

By providing this kind of information at the end, Poe raises moral and political questions, encouraging the reader to wonder whether Dupin's brilliant detection serves values of which the reader might approve.

To those questions, the story offers no answers. In this way, Dupin's demonstration of a magnificent human intellect is placed in the context of moral mystery, quite unlike the tales of Sherlock Holmes and related classical detectives.

On a moral level, who are Dupin and the minister, and what are the meanings of their actions with regard to the well-being of French citizens? While Poe invented what became major conventions in detective fiction—the rational detective, his less able associate, the somewhat ridiculous police force, the solution scene—his detective stories show greater moral complexity than those of his best-known followers.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

"The Fall of the House of Usher" has everything a Poe story is supposed to have according to the popular view of him: a gothic house, a terrified narrator, live burial, madness, and horrific catastrophe.

One of his most popular and most discussed stories, this one has been variously interpreted by critics, provoking controversy about how to read it that remains unsettled. This story was first published in 1839, and it appeared in both of Poe's fiction collections.

The narrator journeys to the home of his boyhood chum, Roderick Usher, a man of artistic talent and generous reputation. Usher has been seriously ill and wishes the cheerful companionship of his old friend. The narrator arrives at the grimly oppressive house in its equally grim and oppressive setting, determined to be cheerful and helpful, but finds himself overmatched. The house and its environs radiate gloom, and though Usher alternates between a kind of creative mania and the blackest depression, he tends also on the whole to radiate gloom. Usher confides that he is upset in part because his twin sister, Madeline, is mortally ill.

It develops, however, that the main reason Usher is depressed is that he has become in some way hypersensitive, and this sensitivity has revealed to him that his house is a living organism that is driving him toward madness.

The narrator does not want to believe this, but the longer he stays in the house with Usher, the more powerfully Usher's point of view dominates him. Madeline dies and, to discourage grave robbers, Usher and the narrator temporarily place her in a coffin in a vault beneath the house. Once Madeline is dead, Usher's alternation of mood ceases, and he remains always deeply gloomy.

On his last evening at Usher, the narrator witnesses several events that seem to confirm Usher's view that the house is driving him mad. Furthermore, these confirmations seem to suggest that the house is just one in a nest of Chinese boxes, in a series of closed, walled-in enclosures that make up the physical and spiritual universe.

This oft-repeated image is represented most vividly in one of Usher's paintings, what appears to be a burial vault unnaturally lit from within. This image conveys the idea of the flame of human consciousness imprisoned, as if buried alive in an imprisoning universe. The terrifying conviction of this view is one of the causes of Usher's growing madness. On the last evening, a storm seems to enclose the house as if it were inside a box of wind and cloud, on which the house itself casts an unnatural light.

The narrator tries to comfort both himself and Usher by reading a story, but the sound effects described in the story are echoed in reality in the house. Usher, as his reason crumbles, interprets these sounds as Madeline, not really dead, breaking through various walls behind which she has been placed her coffin and the vault until finally, Usher claims, she is standing outside the door of the room where they are reading.

The door opens, perhaps supernaturally, and there she stands. The narrator watches the twins fall against each other and collapse; he rushes outside only to see the house itself collapse into its reflection in the pool that stands before it, this last event taking place under the unnatural light of a blood-red moon.

Such a summary helps to reveal one of the main sources of conflicting interpretation. How could such events really occur? Is not this a case of an unreliable narrator, driven toward a horrific vision by some internal conflicts that might be inferred from the content of the vision?

This viewpoint has tended to dominate critical discussion of the story, provoking continuous opposition from more traditionally minded readers who argue that "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a supernatural tale involving occult forces of some kind. Both modes of interpretation have their problems, and so neither has been able to establish itself as superior to the other.

One of the main difficulties encountered by both sides is accounting for the way that the narrator tells his story. He seems involved in the same sort of problem that the community of literary critics experiences. He is represented as telling the story of this experience some time after the events took place.

He insists that there are no supernatural elements in his story, that everything that happened at the House of Usher can be accounted for in a naturalistic way. In this respect, he is like the narrator of "A Descent into the Maelström."

He "knows" that the natural world operates according to regular "natural" laws, but when he actually sees the whirlpool, his imagination responds involuntarily with the conviction that this is something supernatural.

Likewise, the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is convinced that the world can be understood in terms of natural law and, therefore, that what has happened to him at Usher either could not have happened or must have a natural explanation.

Like the narrator of "The Black Cat," another of Poe's most famous stories, this narrator hopes that by telling the story, perhaps again, he will arrive at an acceptable explanation or that his listener will confirm his view of the events.

Perhaps "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a kind of trap, set to enmesh readers in the same sort of difficulty in which the narrator finds himself. If this is the case, then the story functions in a way consistent with Poe's theme of the inadequacy of models constructed by human intelligence to map the great mysteries of life and the universe.

The narrator says he has had an experience that he cannot explain and that points toward an inscrutable universe, one that might be conceived as designed to drive humans mad if they find themselves compelled to comprehend it. Likewise, in reading the story, the reader has an experience that finally cannot be explained, that seems designed to drive a reader mad if he or she insists upon achieving a final view of its wholeness. The story itself may provide an experience that demonstrates the ultimate inadequacy of human reason to understand the mysteries of creation.

CONCLUSION

Although Poe wrote a variety of stories, he is best remembered for his tales of terror and madness. His popular literary reputation is probably a distorted view of Poe, both as person and as artist.

While he was tragically addicted to alcohol and while he did experience considerable difficulty in a milieu that was not particularly supportive, he was nevertheless an accomplished artist whose work, especially when viewed as a whole, is by no means the mere outpouring of a half-mad, anguished soul.

To look closely at any of his best work is to see ample evidence of a writer in full artistic control of his materials, calculating his effects with a keen eye. Furthermore, to examine the range and quantity of his writing, to attend to the quantity of his humor of which there are interesting examples even in **"The Fall of the House of Usher"** to notice the beauty of his poetry, to study the learned intelligence of his best criticism in short, to see Poe whole must lead to the recognition that his accomplishments far exceed the narrow view implied by his popular reputation.

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