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Instances of the Deconstruction of Free Will and Autonomy in Poe and Lovecraft

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the conception of free will and personal autonomy is deconstructed in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft. These authors are classics of American Gothic fiction, and Poe exerted a significant influence on Lovecraft. In this paper, I examine the ways the two authors represented their characters as the results of deterministic laws of nature, rather than autonomous agents who possess the ability of free will. First, I am going to analyze Poe's gothic crime fiction tales, in which the perpetrator-narrators committed their crimes under the effect of "perversity," and even their confessions after the fact are directed by the same force, which makes these confessions morally meaningless. Then, with respect to Lovecraft's tales, I point out atavism and the characters' familial heritage as factors that make free will seem illusory.

Keywords

Lovecraft, Poe, American gothic, horror, supernatural

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's influence on the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft was an obvious fact even in his lifetime, and considerable research has been devoted to exploring the relationship between the two authors' work ever since. This paper aims to contribute to this research by examining the way these authors represented their characters as the results of deterministic laws of nature, rather than autonomous agents who possess the ability of free will. I am going to analyze what I call Poe's gothic crime fiction tales in this study, that is, short stories in which the perpetrator-narrators committed their crimes under the effect of "perversity", and even their confessions after the fact are directed by the same force, which makes these confessions morally meaningless. On the other hand, I am going to take a look at some of H. P. Lovecraft's tales which are centered around atavism and the characters' familial heritage. The point of my argumentation is that both authors deconstructed the conception of free will and personal autonomy.

Meaningless Confessions in Poe's Gothic Crime Fiction

Poe's short stories often focus on our ability to obtain, and the mere possibility of obtaining knowledge about the world, others, or ourselves. In the Introduction of this paper, I referred to Poe's Gothic and detective fiction, and I did so for a reason, as both of these genres are concerned with knowledge to a great extent. In his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale called the detective story "the epistemological genre *par excellence*," and he argued that "the dominant of

modernist fiction is *epistemological*” (McHale 2004: 9, emphases in original). Also, while it would be an overstatement to declare that the Gothic is predominantly concerned with the limits and uncertainties of knowledge, it is certain that knowledge and its limitations play an important part in this genre. This can be exemplified with the notion of the fantastic as defined by Todorov. The Gothic and the fantastic are by no means equivalent (for instance, Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic novels, explaining away the seemingly supernatural occurrences, belong to the uncanny in Todorov’s terminology); however, the fantastic plays tricks on the reader’s mind by means of the element of hesitation (Todorov 1975: 25–31), leaving him/her in doubt about the explanation of the fictitious events. While Poe did not write exclusively fantastic stories, he occasionally did utilize this literary tool, as exemplified by the “pure fantastic” character of “The Black Cat” (Heller 1987: 100–107). Gothic fiction and epistemological limitations are therefore connected.

The Black Cat, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and *The Imp of the Perverse* comprise Poe’s perversity stories: in each of them, the mysterious and inexplicable drive called the perverse assumes a crucial role in the unfolding of events. Each of the stories relate to a homicide, and all of them are presented to the reader as confessions performed by the murderer.

Poe belonged to a group of American writers who experienced “a time when a once-powerful religion was in decline” (Davidson 1957: 183). This decline freed these writers from the duty to adhere to religious doctrines and made it possible for them to treat religion freely in their works. According to Davidson’s reasoning, Romantic writers with a religious imagination, who abandoned actual religious belief, invented a “simulacrum of a religious action and faith,” which resulted in an inclination to “play god” by means of poetry (186). Davidson argued that perversity, as represented by Poe’s short stories, is the result of this attempt to play god (187). In Poe’s universe, morality becomes a kind of an empty formality, manifesting in a series of motions which, however, are not accompanied by an identification with the moral principles they are supposed to express. The Poe-esque character, driven by unpredictable motifs, performs action because his actual condition simply makes him do it (189). This is most evident in *The Imp of the Perverse*. Interestingly, this short story can be divided in a similar way as Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (Coetzee 1985: 216): it consists of a theoretical reflection, in this case about the nature of the perverse, and an account of the events in the narrator’s past which led to his conviction. At the point when the narrator finishes the theoretical part and relates how he was driven to murder, and later reports himself to the authorities, he calls himself “one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse” (Poe 2004: 442). If the goal of all confessions is absolution, this goal is neutralized by the narrator as he exempts himself from responsibility. Absolution requires an admission of responsibility for the deed that is confessed, and this is exactly what the narrator evades by denying himself the status of an autonomous subject. When I introduced Brooks’ observations on confession above, I pointed out that he devoted many pages to what I called the external aspect of confession. This included the efforts of the authorities to create an oppressive atmosphere and make the suspect feel helpless, efforts that make it questionable whether it is possible in most cases to make a voluntary confession. *The Imp of the Perverse* makes a change in perspective: the reader learns almost nothing about the narrator’s environment, rather, the story focuses on his internal dynamics. The narrator tells that he reported himself to the police, but he does this under a curious kind of compulsion: the compulsion of his own body. He tells about a tussle that took place between himself and his body. He felt the compulsion to confess, and he wanted to suppress it (445), even though he was well aware that “in no instance [he] had successfully resisted” the attacks of such fits of perversity (442). The subject distances himself from his body so much that he does not remember his own words, rather, he is informed by others

of what he confessed and how (445). This conclusion is similar to that of Fineman, who remarks that the narrator “is now only an ‘I’ only in the eyes and the ears of the others” (Fineman 2013: 73). The narrator’s autonomous self is reduced to some kind of bystander that helplessly observes the independent workings of a body that he cannot control, and that proves to be a menace to him. From an external point of view, it might seem that the narrator committed homicide, and admitted it afterwards, and the law is basically satisfied with it: this result, if corroborated by further evidence, is enough for a conviction. However, a deeper look at the inner dynamics of the narrator’s subject shows that both responsibility and confession lose their essential meaning because of the disappearance of the self. The narrator stresses that he is but a helpless victim of the urges and compulsions of his body, and this implies that his self is not the ghost in the machine common sense usually imagines. In contrast to Coetzee’s above discussed account of an eternal sequence of positions in Dostoevsky, the self becomes nothing more than an eventuality, an epiphenomenon, and it does not have any significant role in the actions of the human being. This state of affairs questions not only the concept of responsibility that can be attributed to the autonomous subject, but, and this is the important point related to the topic of this paper, confession as a means to absolution also loses its meaning, in other words, confession’s moral function is abandoned.

The same can be said of confession’s self-revealing function: the narrator attempts to nullify his own self, qualifying it as a bystander near the uncontrollable processes and urges that actually determine his behavior. For this reason, no authentic self is detectable that could appear as the source of the narrator’s decisions and acts.

The Tell-Tale Heart, too, features the negation of the self-revealing function of confession. Introducing the methods Poe employed in *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Benfey argues that these stories represent people as “enigmas to one another” (28). In this paper I only consider *The Tell-Tale Heart*. In Benfey’s interpretation, which is reminiscent of Reik’s theory of “the compulsion to confess” (Reik 1959), the madness of the narrator comes from his “inability to communicate” (Benfey 1993: 30). The motivation to confess originates in the narrator’s fear of concealment and longing for transparency: his fear “is not the fear of being caught”, but “the fear of being *cut off*, of being misunderstood” (36–37, emphasis in original). In spite of this urge for transparency, however, the narrator actually offers a misleading confession. Cleman points out that while the narrator stubbornly insists on his sanity (Poe 2004a: 244), it is precisely this insistence, coupled with his refined intellect, that reveal his insanity (Cleman 1991: 630–632). His confession is contradictory: it is made out of an urge to be transparent, yet he cannot be transparent, because he tries to make himself appear something he is not. This contradictory nature deprives confession of its self-revealing function.

As mentioned above, Heller offered a detailed account of the fantastic character of *The Black Cat*. He demonstrated that this short story offers three possible explanations to the events that the narrator relates: a natural (the effect of perversity), a supernatural (the cat is an agent of supernatural revenge), and a psychological one (hallucinations are the result of the narrator’s psychological turmoil) (Heller 1987: 105). This is a good starting point for exploring the dynamics of confession in the story. The fantastic operates as a tool for depriving confession of its epistemological function. While it is certain that a murder has been committed, and the perpetrator is the narrator, the real chain of events that led to this result remains a mystery. This mystery can be detected on at least three levels. First, it is a question whether supernatural agents contributed to the narrator’s decision to kill his wife, or it was caused by naturally explainable factors. Second, if the supernatural explanation is ruled out and we focus on the more realistic possibilities, it still remains undecided whether the narrator was simply guided by the perverse instinct, or he fell prey to the caprice of his

psyche. Third, if the operation of perversity is accepted as an explanation, there remains the question of when and how the influence of perversity became irreversible. This latter dilemma is apparent in the narrator's drinking problems. He emphasizes that the "disease" of drunkenness "grew upon" him (Poe 2004b: 236). Yet the reader cannot learn from the text of this confession whether it was drinking that released the spirit of perversity in him—as Heller seems to suggest (101)—or it was perversity that caused him to drink and ruin his life as a result. All these uncertainties weaken confession's role as an epistemological device in the proper uncovering of the facts of the narrator's case.

Biological Determination in H. P. Lovecraft's Work

Lovecraft's personal relationship to Poe can be learned from his correspondence and his treatise on weird fiction, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. He first "struck" Poe when he was about eight years old (Lovecraft 1968: 109), and he became fascinated with him at once. After the encounter with Poe, it took two decades for Lovecraft to discover new literary idols in Lord Dunsany and Ambrose Bierce, which means that throughout this period, Poe was his major influence in literature. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft devoted a whole chapter to Poe, in which he praised the psychological realism with which Poe represented the mental state of his protagonists (Lovecraft 2004: 101), as well as Poe's mastery in literary composition (102). And while in his later years, Lovecraft read the works of other significant authors of weird fiction, he always held Poe in high regard, as attested by the fact that in a 1934 note, he listed *The Fall of the House of Usher* as his fifth favorite weird tale out of ten (Lovecraft 2004a: 223). Even besides *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft characterized Poe as a master of the short story construction, whose method of the unity of effect is an example worthy of adoption by any aspiring writers (Lovecraft 2004b: 44). Lack of space restricts me from delving deeper into the complexities of Lovecraft's relationship to his very first literary mentor, yet I hope that this short paragraph offered at least a fleeting insight into the ways he was influenced by his early 19th century predecessor.

To discuss Lovecraft's representation of humans, some attention must be paid to his materialistic philosophy, which pervaded his fiction in many respects. Therefore, it is necessary to offer a cursory glance at his general worldview. To do this, I shall rely on S. T. Joshi's overview, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West*. While it is impossible to even hint at the complexities (and sometimes contradictions) of Lovecraft's views, it is necessary to highlight some of his key tenets that are crucial to the point of this paper.

Lovecraft's early materialism was deeply influenced by Hugh Eliot's *Modern Science and Materialism*. Eliot described three principles of materialism which Lovecraft readily espoused: the uniformity of law, the denial of teleology, and the denial of any form of existence other than those perceptible by the natural sciences (Joshi 2016). This view changed a little when Lovecraft read about relativity theory, but the core of Lovecraft's thought remained unchanged. For him, the mind is "one of the complex manifestations" of the principle of the conservation of matter, "a product and attribute of certain forms and processes of matter" (Lovecraft 2006: 75; Joshi 2016). In other words, Lovecraft basically reduced the world to the correlation and change of its material components. This materialism manifested itself in a deterministic view with respect to the possibility of free will. In "A Confession of Unfaith" Lovecraft, recounting his philosophical development, writes that after a "literal adherence" to the antique materialists, he "reluctantly

dismissed free-will forever in favour of determinism” (Lovecraft 2006a: 148). This, of course, does not mean that Lovecraft did not profess any moral convictions; on the contrary, he was, in the words of his close friend James F. Morton, “the most rigid Puritan on earth, both theoretically and practically” (Morton 2011: 428). However, his metaphysical principles led to a deterministic image of the human being. This materialism was joined by an emphasis on racial and cultural heritage: in the absence of universal moral imperatives, Lovecraft believed that one should adhere to the cultural traditions of one’s own ethnical and cultural past. In his fiction, this was manifested by the “horrors of heredity”, the threatening power of a tainted ancestry (Lévy 1988: 73–78).

Many of Lovecraft’s stories introduce characters who fall prey to the entropic processes latent in human nature and, in the right circumstances, degenerate to a more primitive, more instinctual, more animalistic state of being. Even his first short story (his juvenilia not included), *The Beast in the Cave*, written at the age of fourteen, reflects this tendency. In this tale the narrator is lost in a labyrinth of caves, battles an unknown monster, and discovers that the beast was once a human being. In terms of determinism, I think the first two stories that deserve analysis are *Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family* and *The Rats in the Walls*. The protagonists of both tales are destined to discover the atavistic malice that befell on their families. In *Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family*, the eponymous protagonist faces the frightening truth that he is descended from the interbreeding of his great-great-great-grandfather and a female member of an ancient monkey-like tribe. While Joshi points out that this story questions the human race as “separate species” (Lovecraft 2008: 102; Joshi 2003: 159–161), it should also be pointed out that the various occasions of the outbreak of the Jermyn family’s inherent nature show the inability of the family members to overcome nature by the nurture of their civilized and lofty social status. In *The Rats in the Walls*, the narrator moves into the abandoned castle of his ill-famed ancestors, and the hidden cannibalistic instincts of his ancestors rise in his mind, and after a moment of unconsciousness he finds himself feeding on the body of a friend of his long dead son (Lovecraft 2008a: 255). In both stories, humans appear to be no master of themselves, rather, their willpower and autonomy is overcome by more primitive stimuli.

In Lovecraft’s later work, a more subtle form of free will’s illusionary nature appears in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*. This novella relates the story of the eponymous fishing town, whose inhabitants undergo a process of hybridization and degeneration, and gradually morph into Deep Ones, amphibious beings which live in swarms at the bottom of the ocean, and occasionally come to the surface to interact and interbreed with humans. We learn from local drunkard Zadok Allen that there might be an evolutionary connection between the Deep Ones and humans, and there is a hidden instinct in humans that, when awakened, drives them to revert back to a lesser stage in evolution: “Seems that human folks has got a kind o’ relation to sech water-beasts—that everything alive come aout o’ the water onct, an’ only needs a little change to go back agin” (Lovecraft 2008b: 829). There is also a subtler way in which human autonomy is subverted in *The Shadow over Innsmouth*. Lovecraft openly refers to “some imp of the perverse” which made the narrator “change [his] plans” when he decided to speak with Allen instead of departing home immediately (826). This nod to Poe recalls the lack of real intention in the latter’s characters. The reference to and significance of the perverse is affirmed when we witness at the end of the novella the sudden change of the narrator’s intentions. The narrator learns that he, too, is of the Innsmouth breed, and is destined to change into a Deep One in the long run. While he initially contemplates suicide, he finally changes his mind, and feels attraction instead of loathing towards the Deep One’s mythical underwater city (858). This turn of events suggests that the biological changes in the narrator’s

body result in a psychological metamorphosis too, in accordance with Lovecraft's materialism. The narrator's change of mind, therefore, is just seemingly mental, its causes are more material instead.

Finally, one more singular representation of humans in a determinist framework deserves mentioning. *The Colour out of Space* relates the fate of the Gardners, a farmer family living "[w]est of Arkham" (Lovecraft 2008c: 594), where a strange, cosmic, parasitic being breaks loose from a meteorite, possessing, transforming, and withering all living organisms in its environment—including the Gardners themselves. The text hints at the loss of the victims' instinct of self-defense, as "something of stolid resignation about them" is perceptible (604). While Lovecraft does not utilize the motif of tainted heritage, the reader may reasonably conclude that the victims' resistance is reduced because of the bodily transformation effected by the being.

Conclusion

Both Poe and Lovecraft represented human beings as the sports of deterministic forces that make free will illusory. In Poe, this can be observed in his stories about the perverse: the perverse overcomes free will and wrenches subjects to do something they thought they would not do voluntarily. The perverse not only makes its victims commit heinous crimes, but it also effects their own "voluntary" demise by making them confess, and these confessions lose their meaning. In Lovecraft, it is partly materialism and its supposed moral implications, and partly the overbearing power of ancestry that results in the degradation of autonomous subjects to hapless puppets.

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