

Perversity in Edgar Allan Poe's The Black Cat

Nahla Younis^()*

Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the American writer believes that man is driven into evil and violence by some motive which he cannot understand or anticipate. This need to do evil Poe placed in the idea of "perversity", man's tendency to act for the reason that he should not, to do wrong for the wrong sake only.

According to Poe "perversity" is one of the radical impulses of the human heart to act irrationally. It compels man to do the precise deed that will cause him to affront and injure himself.

The present study is an attempt to examine Poe's theory of "perversity" illustrated in his short horrific tale The Black Cat. Poe's protagonist (the narrator) is afflicted with perversity and as a result, is engaged in a series of attitudes and actions toward his self- destruction.

(*) Department of English- College of Basic Education / University of Mosul.

The ultimate reason why man chooses good or evil is far beyond one's knowledge. In Edgar Allan Poe's fiction, "The sinner is compulsively driven by some motive to be malignant, by some maggot in the brain, which he cannot anticipate or understand"⁽¹⁾. This need to do evil Poe placed in the idea of perversity.

Speaking through his narrators, Poe declares that "perversity" is a fundamental force which permeates human existence. It is an unconquerable force that impels us to do the wrong action. People wreck their lives because of impulses beyond their control while humanity seems to be unaware of perversity as the subject is seldom discoursed.

Poe did not find it sufficient to illustrate his theory of perversity in one story only. Perhaps, his most lucid portrayal of perversity resides in his masterfully told tale, "The black Cat" published in 1843 and considered one of Poe's "most powerful tales"⁽²⁾.

The narrator tells a tale of horror and murder from a prison cell. Poe was able to create an entirely separate person from himself for this story. "Poe's narrators possess a character and consciousness distinct from their creator. They speak their own thoughts and are the dupes of their own passion"⁽³⁾.

The narrator's purpose is to place before the world, "Plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events" (pp.288-289)⁽⁴⁾. The events being cutting out a cat's eye and hanging it from a tree and killing his wife and burying her along with a second cat.

To begin with, the narrator appears to be a happily married man, a lover of domestic animals. He owns a black cat named Pluto which he dearly loves. However, the cat's owner takes to drinking and one day in a tantrum, he is seized by impulses beyond his control. He captures the cat and with his pen knife removes one of its eyes. He recognizes that:

It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself - to offer violence to its own nature-to do wrong for the wrong's sake only- that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute (P.292).

The narrator's "fiendish malevolence" in cutting Pluto's eye out from its socket can be easily related to the theme of the story. He declares that "his original soul seemed at once, to take flight from my body" for the crime he has committed:

I Experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty, but it was at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched (P.291).

In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. It went about the house as usual but as might be expected fled in extreme terror from the narrator's approach. At first the man was somewhat grieved by the cat's actions, then his feeling turned into irritation and hatred. Pluto, who had been his favourite, now possesses a special malevolence and becomes the witch the narrator's wife had humorously called him:

One morning in a cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree - hung it with tears streaming from eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart-hung it because I knew in doing so I was committing a sin - a deadly sin (P.292)

The narrator confesses that due to ill temper which is aroused by "alcohol", he cuts out Pluto's eye and hangs it. The tendency to be thrown irresistibly into hatred of the love-object was the cause of the narrator's

"final and irrevocable overthrow; the victory of the spirit of perverseness"⁽⁵⁾.

The night of the day he hangs Pluto, a fire swept through the house and nothing remains of it except a wall to expose to the neighbours "the portraiture" of a hanged gigantic cat. The narrator refuses any connection between his violence and the fire. Yet the image of a hanged cat on the one remaining wall signifies as James Gargano believes "that what survives of the narrator will be haunted by his deeds"⁽⁶⁾.

For months, the narrator says; "I could not rid myself from the phantasm of the cat: and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse" (pp. 293-294). Then he comes to possess another cat, very similar to Pluto, but with a splotch of white hair covering nearly the whole region of the breast (P.214). At first he likes the cat for it is quite affectionate. But his attitude changes; tension grows to hatred, caused by the narrator's discovery that, like Pluto, the new cat has been deprived of an eye.

The narrator, only because of his terrors about the first cat, restrains himself from doing the new cat harm. But in his horror the white patch of fur on his new cat's chest gradually "assumes the shape of a gallows". He begins to fancy the cat as the tormentor of his life. He hates

this second cat beyond measure and decides eventually to kill it. In the words of Knapp Bettina L, "The happiness of the narrator is being blocked by the two cats. He believed that the two cats are assessing and blaming him"⁽⁷⁾. Perversely, the narrator succumbs entirely to evil thoughts "hatred of all things and of all mankind "(P.296).

Then it happened that while the narrator on some household errand with his wife, the cat causes the narrator to lose his footing. In turn the narrator flies into rage and tries to kill the cat with his axe. His wife trying to save the life of the cat, catches hold of the axe. The narrator furiously plants the axe in her skull. To avoid detection in his crime, he bricks his wife into a cellar's wall and accidentally bricks the cat into the wall as well. After searching for the dreaded cat, the narrator concludes that the beast has "in terror fled the premises for ever" (299). Finally he had a good night's sleep with the murder in his mind.

The police came to investigate but they found nothing. However, the fourth day, the police came back to examine the house thoroughly. They leave no "nook or corner unexplored" (P.299). Being satisfied and preparing to quit the search, the police are interrupted in their ascension of the stairs by the triumphant voice of the narrator:

"Gentlemen", I said at last "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. Bye the bye, gentleman, this-this is a very well constructed house". (In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all)- "I may say an excellently well constructed house. These walls - are you going, gentleman ? - these walls are solidly put together"; and here, through the mere phrenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom (P.300)

No sooner had the reverberations of the striking of the cane died away, than there issued forth the howl, "a wailing Shriek, half of horror and half of triumph Such as might have arisen ... from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation" (P.300).

The final horror of the narrator is seen by David Grantz as the narrator's "crowning act of perversity". According to Grantz "the cat had completed its conquest, revealing the location of the corpse and consigning the wretch to the gallows"⁽⁸⁾.

The Black Cat is on one level an intense study of the protagonist's immersion in evil, and on another level a subtle examination of the protagonist's refusal to recognize the moral meaning of his career.

Next to his statement that he is a victim of the perverse, we must place the evidence of a gradual enfeebling of his moral nature accompanied by powerlessness which is admitted by the narrator himself:

Alas! Neither by day nor by night
knew I the blessing of rest anymore!
During the former the creature left me
no moment alone; and, in the later, I
started, hourly from dreams of unutterable fear,
to find the hot breath of the thing upon
my face, and its vast weight - an incarnate nightmare
that I had no power to shake off - incumbent eternally
upon my heart! (P. 296).

The tale is clearly divided into two parts as it deals with two cats either hanged or enwalled. The two parts complete each other by revealing in turn the narrator's inner deterioration and his public exposure.

In the first part, Poe establishes the conditions that precede the protagonist's murder of his wife and his attempt to explain away personal responsibility for his deeds.

In the second part, the protagonist continues to ignore the moral nature of life just as stubbornly as he did in propounding the theory of perverseness. Foolishly, he concludes that in killing his wife whose death heralds the disappearance of the second cat, he has permanently rid himself of guilt and moral considerations. His life, he believes, has been simplified because he no longer feels divided; he takes intellectual comfort in the supposition that he has demonstrated his superiority to moral order.

The narrator of the "Black cat" brings to his defense a well-reasoned theory with perhaps a strong appeal to many readers. He assigns as the cause of his deeds, the motiveless spirit of perverseness, a radical "impulse of the human heart" to act irrationally. It is characteristic of this spirit to act in direct opposition to law. It compels man to choose

irrationally, to do the precise deed that will cause him to affront and injure himself.

Poe's protagonist resorts to the theory of perversity in order to justify his deeds. Yet, it seems that it is not of great help to him as his frantic deeds and rationalizations have all the appearance of a blind attempt to escape moral consequences.

Moreover, the narrator's repeated assertion that he is pushed into evil and self-betrayal by the "imp of perverse" is contradicted by the development of the tale. For instead of being pushed into crime as Gargano observes, he pursues "a life which makes crime inevitable He is guided by his delusions to the climax of damination"⁽⁹⁾.

The narrator's rationalizations then, fail to match the facts for he is haunted and highly disturbed by his actions no matter how he denies it. He cannot understand that "his assault upon another person derives from his moral sickness and unbalance. He seeks psychic release and freedom in a crime which completes his tortures"⁽¹⁰⁾.

According to Halliburton, there must be "punishment for those who cannot attain redemption". We see the transgressor throughout the story, as he says, "torturing himself in his own consciousness, only to be handed over at

the end, through the discovery of his deeds, to the punishment of society as well"⁽¹¹⁾.

Martha Womack argues that what the narrator calls "perverseness" is actually conscience. "Guilt about alcoholism seems to the narrator the perverseness which causes him to kill the first cat. Guilt about those actions indirectly leads to the murder of his wife"⁽¹²⁾.

To sum up, "The Black Cat" illustrates many manifestations which the perverse can assume. First, the narrator succumbs to alcohol: then the narrator's spirit of perversity, given a foothold in his psyche causes the eventual decline in his temperament. As the story progresses, the narrator reaches the point in which "perversity" becomes absolutely irresistible.

Notes

- 1- Edward H. Davidson (1964), *Poe: A Critical study* (Harvard university Press, 1964), P. 192.
- 2- Arthur Hobson Quinn (1941), *Edgar Allan Poe : A Critical Biography* (New York : Appleton - Century Company), P.395.
- 3- J.R.Hammoud (1983), *An Edgar Allan Poe Companion* (Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press LTD), P.27.
- 4- Edgar Allan Poe (1967), *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London : Oxford University Press), further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 5- Wolf Mankowitz (1978), *The Extra Ordinary Mr. Poe* (London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson), P. 144.
- 6- James W. Gargano, "The question of Poe's Narrators" in Robert. Regan, ed. (1967), *Poe : A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey : Prentice Hall, Inc.), P. 177.

- 7- Bettina L. Knapp (1984), *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York : Frederick Ungar publishing (Co.), P. 146.
- 8- David Grantz (2003), "Doing the wrong : A portrait of perversity"
Available : <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/rotunda/profirel/Poe.html>.
- 9- James W.Gargano, P. 170.
- 10- Ibid, P. 171.
- 11-David Halliburton (1973), *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (New Jersey: Printiceton University Press), P.291.
- 12- Martha Womack (2004), "Edgar Allan Poe's The Black Cat", Available:
<http://www.eserver.org/books/Poe.htm>

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ملخص

الاعوجاج النفسي في قصة الكاتب اڤارد أنز بوا القطعة السوداء

نهلة يونس^(*)

يعتقد الكاتب الأمريكي Edgar Allan Poe (1909-1949) أن الإنسان قد يندفع نحو الشر والعنف بدوافع قد لا يفهمها ولا يستطيع التنبؤ بها. إن ميل النفس البشرية إلى الشر وانحرافها عن المسار الصحيح يعني إصابتها "بالاعوجاج" وهذا يسميه Poe "Perversity" فيتصرف الإنسان تصرفات غير عقلانية ومخالفة للقانون ويؤذي نفسه قبل الآخرين.

وبالنسبة للكاتب فان ظاهرة الاعوجاج النفسي ما هي إلا دافع متأصل في النفس البشرية أو قوة فعالة لا يمكن السيطرة عليها إذا ما وقع الإنسان تحت تأثيرها.

نحاول في هذه الدراسة إلقاء الضوء على نظرية "Theory of Perversity" والتي جسدها في الكثير من أعماله ولكنها جاءت أكثر وضوحاً في قصته القطعة السوداء (The Black Cat) حيث يصاب بطل القصة (وهو الراوي) بالاعوجاج النفسي وكنتيجة لذلك انغمس في سلسلة من المواقف والأعمال الجنونية أدت به إلى الهاوية.

(*) قسم اللغة الإنكليزية – كلية التربية الأساسية / جامعة الموصل.