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Towards an Introspective Reality: Poe and Hawthorne Recalled

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Abstract: Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne are the two genius writers of the nineteenth century America. They are considered the forefathers of the American Romanticism as they take romanticism beyond its borders, into a realistic dimension. What both of them practice is dark romanticism, because what permeates through their works is the negative side of people. Besides, they innovate to short story and detective fiction in which they depict a different reality of life. Although Poe and Hawthorne might look different at first sight, they have a lot in common in terms of their distinct realistic attitudes. This article will focus on these representative features of the two author's fiction in the short stories "The Black Cat" and "Young Goodman Brown," both investigating themes such as the human temptation and the evil side of humankind.

Keywords: *American Romanticism, realism, human condition, short story.*

Introduction

Highly appreciated in the modern age, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne are known for their distinct ways of expression and the use of effective styles, which is why it is hardly astonishing to draw similarities between the two with regard to their short stories "The Black Cat" and "Young Goodman Brown" (Jones, 1994: 429). Applying to similar symbols and motives in their writings, they exhibit common points to be taken into consideration as they reflect the other side of reality. In this paper, I shall analyse the points in the short stories that the two writers make use of to present their personal understanding of reality.

Reality through Poe and Hawthorne's Eyes

Principally, Edgar Allan Poe is an early nineteenth century writer who is quite challenging and innovative in his techniques and style. He exposes the human psychology from a darker angle and brings forth the

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undiscovered sides of real life, thus creates a dark, romantic, yet ironically realistic atmosphere. He has a difficult familial life because of which he is mostly said to create such grotesque and sordidly realistic stories. He is famous for his stories full of horror and mystery such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” On the other side, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is known for his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*, is also a great nineteenth century writer, exemplifies Transcendentalism in his works which is a philosophical movement in the 1830s and 40s claiming that the state, church and other governmental institutes corrupt the innate innocence of the individuals and that the humanbeings should be all free and consciously united with the divine, in other words, nature. This way, the society shall consist of self-reliant and confident members, the transcendentalists argue. Compared to Poe, Hawthorne seems to embody a more conforming personality and self-fashioned style, yet he still has the courage to criticise the state, the church and even his own Puritan ancestors for crimes they all committed (Marshall, 2009: 21-32). Hence, one can point out that these two writers significantly go their own distinct paths. Yet, with a detailed study, it is immediately comprehended that Poe and Hawthorne desire to give humanity similar messages in similar techniques in their “The Black Cat” and “Young Goodman Brown” stories.

To begin with, both writers belong to the American Romantic tradition in that they focus on the feelings as well as psychology of the individuals and reflect the inner side of humanbeings in contrast to the harsh rationality and dogma of the Age of Reason (Pakdiwatan 2004: 3). Still, they practice dark romanticism because what is transmitted through their works is the negative and dark side of humanbeings and life in general. So, it is fair to claim that they depict reality through the dark actions of the characters. In this respect, two stories are parallel in their main themes implemented within narration.

“The Black Cat” by Poe is a short story about a cold hearted man who confesses the reader how pitilessly he killed his beloved cat first and then his wife for no certain reason but the inherent evil growing inside him. He is a normal, compassionate man in the beginning of the story. He has been brought up as an animal lover by his parents and he continues to pet many animals like birds and rabbits in his house even after he is married (Poe 1843: 4). He and his sensitive wife pursue a quite normal and happy life until the narrator starts consuming alcohol. After then, he gets wilder, less conscious and more vicious each passing day by drinking. He loses his temper easily, ignores, in fact tortures all his pets but the black cat named Pluto and even humiliates his wife. Later on, he possesses a much more

arrogant and cruel attitude towards everyone and everything around him. Meanwhile, his wife is rather understanding towards him even though other household members (i.e. animals) avoid him to protect themselves. Nevertheless, the black cat Pluto gets on his nerves for following him everywhere and the narrator turns into a monster after he blinds Pluto with a penknife one night and kills him the other night. He explains these actions as sins, yet he does not feel any guilt as he has no conscience left (1843: 6, 7, 8).

What is more, the darkness, hate and rage hidden inside his nature are all triggered because of a symbolic outside element, which is alcohol in the story. Through the end of the story, he takes another black cat from the streets, but this one has some white around its neck, as being different from Pluto. Even though he wants to be a normal person again and love this cat, he attempts to kill it just as he did before. Yet, he kills his wife instead by accident. But even this loss does not affect him. In fact, he is happy that there is no one around anymore to bother him. So, cruelly he buries the body into the cellar wall and feels like he has just got rid of a burden. The cat is also amiss which gives him great relief. He is happy just for a few days because neither the neighbours nor the police visit his house to ask about his wife who is now long dead. Then, the police catches him unaware and searches every part of the house including the cellar.

Meanwhile, the narrator is extremely calm as he has walled his wife in and there is no way to discover it unless he confesses to the police himself. He acts normal, smiles and takes the police officers towards the exit of the cellar. But, just as they are leaving the place, a terrible noise, in fact, moaning is heard from inside the wall and the officers open the wall to see a corpse and a giant black cat resting on the head of the body. This scene is the most subtle evidence to the narrator's crime, which sends him to the gallows at the end of the story. This end can also be interpreted as the divine justice of the "Most Merciful and Most Terrible" God, in Poe's own words, to an extremely sinful human being (1843: 8). Hence, Poe suggests that men can become the devil itself quite easily because the darkness is already a part of human beings just like goodness and that they can commit sin only because it is forbidden to them. The theme is quite realistic and common to all humanity as almost all evil in the world is related to the acts of people. This depicts the human temptation into sin and the innate evil inside mankind which are also studied by Hawthorne from a dark Romantic perspective likewise. (Dinçer, 2010: 220-23)

In "Young Goodman Brown", Nathaniel Hawthorne wields similar themes to Poe's about the human nature and the tendency to sin. The story is about an ordinary man Young Goodman Brown, as the name suggests,

who departs his house saying goodbye to his young and pious wife, Faith at night to arrange some business matters. His wife is worried that he is going into the forest at night, yet Goodman Brown assures her that he will be alright, in fact thinking she might be right anyway because he is into an evil path. He walks through the forest which is considered to be a frightening and evil place at night and regrets that he has left home. He then meets his friend in the woods who is elder and more cunning than him and who has a mysterious, snake-like staff on his back. They continue their way talking about a range of topics including the governor and the religious fathers of the town of whom Goodman Brown dreads very much. (Hawthorne, 1835: 1, 2)

Shortly after, they come across an elderly pious woman Goodman Brown has known since his childhood. Brown's friend decides to meet the woman alone while Brown hides because he does not want to be labelled as a man wandering in the woods at night. Brown watches his friend and the woman from a distance, but they seem to indulge in a strange conversation and he gets shocked when his friend's staff turns into a man. Goodman Brown cannot believe his eyes, as what has just happened is beyond reason and his comprehension. Then, the man and old woman keep talking about the meeting of a secret group in the woods and soon they join them. The meeting brings the bishops, aristocrats, young, old, good and bad, pious as well as criminal people of the town side by side. This causes a great trauma in Young Goodman Brown as all people he fears and respects are chanting mysterious and magical words at night and in this forest. He is even more surprised while his wife Faith is dragged into the group as a victim who is to be offered to a black shadow for her faith and innocence.

The group circles around a black shadow in the shape of a man and keep chanting. At the same time, the shadow calls his people, this group, as his children. He indicates these people are from the witches' generation who were executed and burned long ago during witch trials. Hence, this incident changes Brown's notion of good and evil because he loses his faith and trust in religion and in these people most of whom he adored minutes ago. So confused and rageful, he decides to save his wife and prepares to interrupt the ritual ignoring the fact that this group might hurt him. For he has just killed all his faith, he has no fear of anything anymore. Therefore, he challenges these people to give him his wife back, yet the group surround them and listen to the dark figure. Then, the figure baptises the group with a kind of liquid like blood. At this instant, Goodman Brown realises that his ancestors are also magical people, the witches (1835: 4-7). He and his wife are the only ones hesitating to join the darkness and he tells Faith to be strong and resist against the evil.

At the end, he is left alone in the woods leaning on a damp rock. In this confused state, Goodman Brown wakes up from his dream. Faith is by his side and everything seems normal. Still, under the influence of the ritual incident, he starts acting skeptical towards his wife, the bishops, aristocrats and the other townspeople he sees in everyday life. At the end of the story, the narrator conveys that Young Goodman Brown lives for long years with his wife, children and grandchildren. However, he has lost his soul at that night in the forest. After then, he has pursued his life as a man without faith. Consequently, it is again and again assured that this story is about humanbeings' easy tendency to lose faith and embrace the evil.

Young Goodman Brown loses his strict Puritan faith only because of a small happening which gives no clue if it was real or imaginary. This proves his irrational fondness to religion and also secret doubts about religion which come to surface by an event either happened or dreamed. These doubts are indeed the reflections of Hawthorne's own cynicism about his Puritan past (Dinçer, 2010: 224). So, Hawthorne clearly indicates that mankind, who is represented by Goodman Brown in the story, are so quickly seduced to leave faith and step into the realm of darkness (Kallay, 2003: 36). As seen in both stories, two authors emphasise the very same quality of mankind, also the blurry distinction between good and evil.

Apart from the themewise resemblances, Poe and Hawthorne make use of similar symbols, motives and styles in their stories. They employ elements to create a persuasive, realistic but at the same time supernatural atmosphere as a context to their narration (Dinçer, 2010: 224-25). In terms of supernatural, Poe brings back the dead cat Pluto in the second cat's body in "The Black Cat." Besides, the second cat has some white around its neck which symbolises the rope Pluto is hanged with. Hence, it symbolises resurrection. The mysterious fire in the narrator's house which starts at the very night he murders Pluto, also the terrible sound coming out of the cellar wall and the last scene with the corpse and the cat's head are other examples of the supernatural in Poe's story.

As for Hawthorne's supernatural in "Young Goodman Brown", the forest is narrated as an evil place and Young Goodman Brown's friend turns his burden into a man. Then a ritual takes place and people chant, after that a shadow emerges and commands to people, Faith is brought to the place for sacrifice and at the end of the story, it is not proved if this has all been a dream or not. So, the story develops in a supernatural and horrible atmosphere in which all bad events happen at night and it ends mysteriously just like Poe's story "The Black Cat." Moreover, both Poe and Hawthorne choose their characters' names intentionally to serve their purpose in the

stories. For instance, Poe's black cat is named Pluto, which means "the lord of the dead." Accordingly, the cat dies and resurrects to take revenge from its master in the end which really justifies its name. Similarly, the narrator who is the representative of the tempted mankind and his wife as the representative of goodness do not have any names because the only significant thing in the story is the cat, its revival and revenge from a sinful human being.

In Hawthorne's story, the names are quite allegorical as well. Young Goodman Brown is a random name which reflects the once (in youth) faithful and good mankind while his wife Faith represents the name itself, faith to God. However, these names are corrupted through the end of the story when the characters lose their goodness and faith. Additionally, there is colour symbolism harnessed in both works. In Poe's "The Black Cat," the colour black and white are described as the symbols of darkness, death and resurrection. The "blackness" of Pluto is associated with witches and the white around the second cat's neck symbolises resurrection. On the other hand, Hawthorne similarly interprets the colour black as the evil itself as in the appearance of the black shadow and walking in the forest at night. As a final remark, in both stories the narrator is not known, it is anonymous. Poe's narrator is the nameless protagonist calmly confessing his cruel acts and Hawthorne's narrator is in third person telling the faithless life of an ordinary man named Young Goodman Brown. The particular reason behind these choices is the authors' desire to make their stories seem less strange and more as a part of daily life so that people can embrace the stories and get their lessons from them.

Finally, in terms of transgressing the values and boundaries of the 19th century American society and reflecting the other side of reality to the readers, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" bears the reminiscence of his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne defies the norms of the small society of her town when she has an affair out of wedlock and has a baby. After that she becomes the scapegoat of the people and is forced to bear the scarlet letter "A" for adultery and affair. Likewise, Goodman Brown discovers his connection to the "othered" witches and becomes a different man afterwards. Then again, the forest is associated with evil in darkness in both works and all evil or non-traditional incidents take place in the forest. Hester meets her lover in the forest and Goodman Brown encounters the town folk enchanting in the forest as well. In that sense, Hawthorne exemplifies the desire of a change and also the defiance of religion, tradition and morality through his works.

Conclusion

Once and for all, although Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne are usually mentioned as being rather different in talent, creativity, themes and styles, in “The Black Cat” and “Young Goodman Brown” they built a striking analogical relationship between their works. They are not only the members of the same literary movement, that is American Romanticism, but they also embody the same tendency to create mysterious, supernatural, terrifying, symbolical and negatively, strikingly realistic works in attempt to expose psychology of people and picture the everyday human condition in their realistic way. Hence, Poe and Hawthorne are rediscovered for having similarity in contrast with distinction as many have and would put forth.

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Rezumat: Edgar Allan Poe și Nathaniel Hawthorne sunt recunoscuți drept genii ale creației literare americane a secolului al XIX-lea. Ei sunt considerați fondatorii romantismului american, translatând acest curent literar peste frontierele sale, într-o dimensiune realistă. Ceea ce îi unește pe cei doi scriitori este romantismul întunecat, latura negativă a ființei umane fiind cea care domină operele lor. Pe lângă aceasta, ei aduc inovații importante nuvelei și prozei polițiste, prin care descriu o altă realitate a vieții.

Deși, Poe și Hawthorne pot părea diferiți la prima vedere, aceștia au multe lucruri în comun în ceea ce privește abordarea de factură realistă, întâlnită mai ales în nuvele. Articolul