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THE ROLE OF 'DOPPELGANGER' IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE TELL-TALE HEART*

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Abstract:

A salient feature in many of Edgar Allan Poe's stories is the concept of a nemesis appearing as a doppelganger. A doppelganger is a double an apparitional twin or counterpart to another living person. In Poe's stories involving a doppelganger, the protagonist identifies closely with the antagonist and vice versa. The double appears in such stories as "The Purloined Letter," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Tell-Tale Heart." The idea of the protagonist fighting a counterpart occurs so often in Poe's works that critics often suggest that it indicates Poe's attempts to work out, through his writings, his own inner conflicts and psychological struggles. One of Poe's most famous short stories, "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), is a psychological portrait of a mad narrator who kills an old man and afterward hears his victim's relentless heartbeat. In the following essay, an attempt has been made to examine the role of the twin and the doppelganger in "The Tell-Tale Heart".

Key Words*: Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart", doppelganger, twin, counterpart.*

One of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous short stories, "The Tell-Tale Heart," was first published in the January, 1843 edition of James Russell Lowell's *The Pioneer*. The story is a psychological portrait of a mad narrator who kills a man and afterward hears his victim's relentless heartbeat. While "The Tell-Tale Heart" and his other short stories were not critically acclaimed during his lifetime, Poe earned respect among his peers as a competent writer, insightful literary critic, and gifted poet, particularly after the publication of his famous poem, "The Raven," in 1845.

After Poe's death in 1849, some critics faulted his obsession with dark and depraved themes. Other critics, like George Woodberry in his 1885 study of Poe, considered "The Tell-Tale Heart" merely a "tale of conscience." But this simplistic view has changed over the years as more complex views of Poe and his works have emerged. Poe is now considered a forefather of two literary genres, detective stories and science fiction, and is regarded as an important writer of psychological thrillers and horror.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is simultaneously a horror story and psychological thriller told from a first-person perspective. It is admired as an excellent example of how a short story can produce an effect on the reader. Poe believed that all good literature must create a unity of effect on the reader and this effect must reveal truth or evoke emotions. "The Tell-Tale Heart" exemplifies Poe's ability to expose the dark side of humankind and is a harbinger of novels and films dealing with psychological realism. Poe's work has influenced genres as diverse as French symbolist poetry and Hollywood horror films, and writers as diverse as Ambrose Bierce and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

In the generations since his death, however, critics have come to fully appreciate Poe's works. His poetry continues to be popular, and he is now regarded as an early master of the short story, particularly for his contributions to the detective and horror genres, of which "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a prime example. One of the reasons why he is so highly regarded is because his stories are open to so many different interpretations, a factor that was not appreciated in his day. Contemporary critics acknowledge that "The

Tell-Tale Heart" can be read as a classic example of American Gothicism, a morality tale, a supernatural story, a criticism of rationalism, and a multi-level psychological narrative.

Although "The Tell-Tale Heart" did not receive much recognition during the author's lifetime, its status has gained steadily since his death. Now among one of his most widely read works, the tale adds to Poe's reputation as an innovator of literary form, technique, and vision. Almost every important American writer since Poe shows signs of his influence, particularly those writing gothic fiction and grotesque satires and humor.

In literature, a doppelganger is a character that functions as the main character's double in order to highlight the main character's personality or act as a foil to it. Some critics have maintained that in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the old man functions as a doppelganger to the narrator. Thus, the narrator is truly mad, and he kills the old man because he cannot stand himself, perhaps fearing becoming old or disfigured like him. The narrator recounts evidence to support this idea: he does not hate the man, in fact, he professes to love him; on the eighth night when the narrator sneaks into his room, the old man awakens, sits bolt upright in bed and listens in silence for an hour in the darkness, as does the narrator. Most notably, when the old man begins to moan, the narrator admits that the same sound had "welled up from my own bosom"[1] many nights. When he hears the man's heart quicken with terror, he admits that he is nervous, too. Other critics have maintained that the old man does not exist. After all, the narrator tells police that it was he who screamed, and it is not stated that the police actually found a body. According to this viewpoint, the old man's cloudy eye is nothing more than a twisted fixation of the narrator's own mind, and the relentless heartbeat is not the old man's, but the narrator's.

A salient feature in many of Edgar Allan Poe's stories is the concept of a nemesis appearing as a *doppelganger*. A *doppelganger* is a double - an apparitional twin or counterpart to another living person. In Poe's stories involving a *doppelganger*, the protagonist identifies closely with the antagonist and vice versa. The double appears in such stories as "The Purloined Letter," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Tell-Tale Heart." The idea of the protagonist fighting a counterpart occurs so often in Poe's works that critics often suggest that it indicates Poe's attempts to work out, through his writings, his own inner conflicts and psychological struggles.

The identification of the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" with the old man is a primary motif in the story. Many times throughout the story, the narrator says that he knows how the old man feels. He claims to know the groans of the old man, and that he too had experienced the same moans - not of pain or sadness but of mortal terror. It is a terror which "arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe." (188) The narrator says:

> I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my bosom, deepening, with its echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I know what the old man felt.... (188)

The narrator knows such fearful restlessness first hand: "He (the old man) was still sitting up in the bed, listening; - just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall." (188) Thus the narrator and the old man are on such equal footing that they seem almost like the same person.

Ostensibly, the protagonist has no rational reason for wanting to kill the old man. Indeed, he claims the old man has never done him wrong and that he loves him and does not want his money. Why, then, is there a need for murder? "Object there was none. Passion there was none," (187) says the narrator. Neither does the narrator explain how or why exactly the old man's "pale blue eye, with a film over it" (187) bothers him so greatly. In fact he only thinks it was the eye that first prompted him with murderous thoughts: "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!" (187) Critic Charles E. May, however, interprets the "eye" not as an organ of vision but as the homonym of "I." Thus, what the narrator ultimately wants to destroy is the self, and he succumbs to this urge when he could no longer contain his overwhelming sense of guilt.

The idea of knowing the antagonist so well as to know his every move reappears in "The Purloined Letter," a story about two long-time nemeses, Dupin and Minister D. In this story, Minister D. steals a compromising letter from the Queen, and Dupin attempts to recover the letter. Minister D. blackmails the Queen by threatening to divulge to the King the information gained from the letter. The Queen's agents are unable to find the letter because they assume that the Minister thinks like them. Dupin, however, finds the letter because he knows the Minister well enough to know how he thinks. He sets up his nemesis for a fall when he replaces the letter with a counterfeit one, thereby endangering the Minister's life when he attempts to blackmail the Queen with a worthless note. Dupin claims that he accomplishes all this because he shares the same intellect and interests as the Minister they possess the same poetic yet mathematical mind. Dupin knows Minister D. so intimately that he knows how to hold his interest in a meeting while stealing back the letter from under his nose.

In Poe's works involving protagonists and *doppelgangers*, the characters exist in a moral vacuum. Poe's concerns with aesthetics, style, and effect on the reader override concerns with moral issues. In the struggle between Dupin and Minister D., the reader never knows whether Dupin is working for the "right" political cause. The reader assumes that the Queen has committed an imprudent deed and suspects that there is something very undemocratic about the police working directly for the Queen in what may be a partisan political struggle. But political positions are immaterial in Poe's morally ambiguous stories. The fact that Dupin could possibly be aiding a corrupt or undemocratic faction while Minister D. could be a rebellious politician and brave with anti-monarchical goals is not really an issue with Poe. He never advocates a political or moral position or suggests which is the "correct" one. Poe rejected the position of many of his contemporaries who valued the utilitarian nature of literature and who also believed that literature should be instructive and provide moral guidance. Poe called their ideological position "the heresy of the didactic." Poe's writing aims at a concentrated effect on or emotional response from the reader; the moral positions of the protagonist, antagonist, or other characters do not play a prominent role in the stories. Morally, therefore, the protagonist and his double are identical. The elimination of the *doppelganger* becomes a destruction of a moral twin - sometimes a self-destructive act.

The idea of the nemesis as twin reappears in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Roderick Usher is so close to his twin sister, Madeline, that the two are said to share one consciousness. In this tale, the narrator is visiting Roderick, a childhood friend who has fallen on hard times. Roderick announces that his sister is dead and entombs her in a coffin in the basement. But the narrative hints that she is still alive, for she expresses "a faint blush" even as the narrator and Roderick close the lid to her coffin. She appears to be suffering from catalepsy, a condition which causes muscle rigidity and an appearance of death. When she mysteriously awakens from her catatonic state late one night, she walks to her terrified brother and falls on him. Roderick and his twin then collapse, both dead. Roderick understands exactly how Madeline feels and acts; there are strong psychological and sexual links between the two. The narrator implies that the Usher family survives only via incest; Roderick and Madeline are the last members of this accursed house. Some critics thus interpret Roderick's act of entombing Madeline alive as an attempt to end this curse. The similarities and links between Roderick and Madeline are too obvious to dismiss. One of Roderick Usher's paintings features a burial vault lit from within, as if he knows about a life-force emanating from inside a coffin. Roderick loves his sister like no other. Their birth and death occur at the same time. Both siblings emit feelings of gloom and doom. Madeline appears wraithlike, as if she is just an apparition. Roderick too appears deathlike and feels his sister's every move and presence; when he announces that she is outside the door and has come for him, she appears exactly as he predicts. The elimination of one sibling thus spells the end of the other. Indeed, after entombing his sister, Roderick becomes more agitated, wild, and fearful, realizing fully that his time too has arrived.

If the two siblings are in fact one in spirit, then their actions may also be interpreted as suicide rather

than murder. Poe does not concern himself with the moral actions of the characters in "The Fall of the House of Usher"; the narrator feels no immediate guilt for having aided in the entombment of a person who may possibly be alive. The story seeks primarily to stir fear in the reader, with the issue of morality marginalized. The characters operate in an inscrutable universe where all of them, particularly the protagonist and the *doppelganger*, are equally amoral.

Returning to "The Tell-Tale Heart," one can thus argue that the murder becomes an act of suicide and that the protagonist and the antagonist are moral equals. Taking this argument one step further, one can suggest that the two characters could well be the same person. Ostensibly, the police find no trace of an old man in the house. The narrator has hidden him so well that the old man may exist only in the narrator's mind. Some critics imply that the beating heart is really the sound of the narrator's own heartbeat. As his excitement, nervousness, and guilt mount, his heartbeat seems to grow louder to his overly acute senses. In the end, the narrator tells the police that he was the one who shrieked, waking himself up from a nightmare and a dreamlike logic as well as destroying an enemy which might not have existed.

Critics who have studied Poe sometimes suggest that his characters resemble him both physically and temperamentally. Similarities can be seen between physical descriptions of Roderick Usher - particularly his pale face and large luminous eyes - and of photographs (daguerreotypes) of Poe. Parallels can also be drawn between the conflicts between the protagonists and antagonists in Poe's works and Poe's difficult financial and emotional relationship with his foster father, John Allan. Such conflicts in his writings as the struggles of the protagonist against the *doppelganger* and overwhelming inexplicable natural forces represent a therapeutic banishment of Poe's own inner demons and psychological struggles.

Notes:

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. By J. Gerald Kennedy. New York: Penguin, 2006, pp 187-191. All the quotations from the story are taken from this edition. Page numbers in the parentheses have been given in the body of the text.