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How Poe's Life Leaked into His Works

Ask anyone about the author Edgar Allan Poe and most likely everyone will have a different opinion of him. Opinions on Poe range from a crazy, mad drunk to a genius, classic, thrilling author. There is no doubt that as an author Poe was different than other authors in his time, he is commonly referred to as the “father of modern mystery” and originator of science fiction stories (Olney 416). Much of Poe's works reflect his life and who he was as a person.

Poe began writing in 1832, publishing his first story anonymously. The recurrence of eerie themes in Poe's writings brought much controversy; Poe's works were the first of its kind. Poe's stories have supernatural events in them, many involving death or life beyond death. The rumor went around that Poe was drunk or on drugs when he wrote, but this theory cannot be proved according to Merton Yewdale (688). Poe's personal life has been distorted by other people's theories that the public has taken as facts. The beginning of the falsehoods and bashing of Poe's reputation was Rufus Griswold's *Memoir of the Author* (1850) which claimed Poe was part mad and his defects were “of character and not circumstance” (Young 444). Griswold's biography of Poe was full of lies, and was the only information the public had about him. Since then, the truth of Poe and his life has been distorted and much of it still remains a mystery.

What is certain is that Poe had a traumatic childhood, which many critics believe greatly influenced his works. Three years after he was born both his parents died and he was sent to live with a wealthy tobacco worker named John Allan. Poe was separated from his siblings who went

to live with other family members. Poe grew up with tension with Allan who gave him insufficient funds to go to college and never accepted him as his legal heir. Not only did Poe have problems at home but he also experienced problems outside of the home. Poe's first traumatic experience with a woman was when his fiancée Elmira Royster became engaged to someone else while he was in college. Throughout his life, Poe had more sad experiences with women. In 1829 Poe's foster mother Frances Allan, to whom he was very close, died. This was only the beginning of tragic deaths in Poe's life. When Poe was twenty-seven, he married his thirteen year old cousin Virginia Clemm. After being married eleven years, Clemm contracted tuberculosis and died. After her death Poe began drinking heavily. There are several accounts of Poe being drunk at work, and that a single drink would send him into hysteria (Yewdale 688). Although he did drink, not all of Poe's problems can be attributed to alcohol. The answers to Poe's character can be found in why he drank at all. Some critics believe Poe was a man with a mixture of incredible intellect of logical reason with melancholic and mystic feelings. Because of his intellect, he was able to see the world with intensity and clarity. Together, they were a strong force that took a heavy toll on him and his character. It can be argued that reason drove him mad; his incredible intellect made him over think everything until it drove him crazy. Some critics believe Poe was a man with no emotions at all, which I do not believe is true. Poe was not only an abnormal and dark person as an adult; he was also like this as a child: he used to go to graveyards at night to sit by the grave of one of his friends buried there. I believe this example shows how even as a child Poe thought a lot about death at a young age experienced intense feelings of sadness. This example leads me to believe Poe was not a person without emotions, but was extremely emotional.

Mwerton Yewdale believes Poe was plagued by memories, morbid thoughts and logical thinking, and may have turned to alcohol to escape his reality, as he expressed to Sarah Whitman, his friend and lover, telling her how he felt about life: “I have absolutely no pleasure in the stimulants in which I sometimes so madly indulge. It has not been in the pursuit of pleasure that I have perilled life and reputation and reason. It has been in the desperate attempt to escape from torturing memories” (Yewdale 693). From alcohol, Poe escaped from his everyday experiences. Poe was a solitary man without friends to provide him an active social life. There is no doubt in my mind that Poe’s dark and morbid characteristics worsened during and after his wife’s death in 1848. Poe became extremely depressed, and wrote about it in a letter to James Herron in 1842 while his wife was still sick: “My wife’s health has slightly improved and my spirits have risen in proportion; but I am still very unwell — so much so that I shall be forced to give up and go to bed.” This letter shows Poe had depressive tendencies and was often unhappy.

Poe did have a hard life, but one cannot dismiss the possibility that heredity played a part in his personality as well as life’s circumstances. Psychologist John Robertson believed that Poe’s character and troubled mind came down simply to heredity, which led to drinking and eventually to brain damage and left him disturbed and troubled. I believe some aspects can be contributed to heredity, such as his predisposition to depression, but Poe’s life circumstances definitely heightened and worsened whatever was passed down through genetics. In Mark Carnes’ review of *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* by Jeffrey Meyers, he says that Poe had a hard life due to poverty, rejection and failures which contributed to his character. Poe lived in poverty from adolescence all the way to adulthood, and sought out rich women for companionship and financial assistance. Poe even denounced literary figures in his day desperate for recognition he believed he deserved (Carnes 1682). Contributing to Poe’s troubles were his

stepfather, literary groupies, publishers and the public who didn't give him the recognition he deserved as a genius. Poe's hard life circumstances in his personal and professional life definitely had a negative effect on him, leaving him disappointed and empty.

Of all the theories about Poe I agree with Haldeen Braddy who believes Poe's psychological state can be attributed to both heredity and environment (394). Poe's father was a wandering drunk and his environment as a child was filled with tragedies and tension within his foster family, mainly his foster father John Allan. With the same qualities as his father, Poe was unable to adapt to rules and routines and was expelled from the University of Virginia and West Point (Braddy 394). These are examples of how Poe could have inherited certain characteristics from his father, but his environment in his foster home worsened them making him a troubled person. According to Braddy, Poe showed in various instances his desire and need to escape from reality: using assumed names while in the army, lying in a "Memorandum" to Editor R. W. Griswold that he had traveled to Europe and South America, and his dependency on alcohol and narcotics (Braddy 395). Poe was often in poor health and malnourished, which eventually led to a lesion in the brain. Braddy states Poe was never a confirmed narcotic addict and was not clinically insane (394). However, Poe had many ways of escaping reality through seeking emotional support through various things such as drugs, women, and alcohol which only made matters worse and contributed to unhappiness and his dissatisfaction for life. Poe's cousin, Neilson Poe, noticed Poe's dissatisfaction with life and wrote about it in a letter to his aunt Maria Clemm in 1849: "Edgar had seen so much of sorrow - had so little reason to be satisfied with life - that, to him, the change can scarcely be said to be a misfortune" (Braddy 395). Braddy believes that Poe's desire to escape reality was portrayed in his writing which often involved supernatural and unnatural ideas. As Braddy said in her article, "His art was conscious

attempt to transmit an experience of escape to the reader without involving that reader in any more of a psychological dilemma more than the writer himself felt.”

Poe was not insane or heartless. Poe was a depressive and dark person with incredible talent and intellect, whose circumstances in life led him to be emotionally unstable and disturbed in many ways. To get away from his own dissatisfaction with life, he escaped reality with writing and unhealthy outlets like drugs and women. Whatever the reasons of Poe’s character and personality, there is no doubt aspects of his life leaked into his works. Several of character in Poe’s stories suffered from psychological problems and had questionable mental states. Two particular stories that reflect bits and pieces of Poe’s psychological state and life are “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

The “Tell Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s most well-known psychological thrillers. The main character in the story is also the narrator, who according to Dan Shen, suffered from neurosis (327). The narrator kills an old man who is living in the same house because of his “evil eye” after watching him in the night for seven days. The narrator finally breaks down on the eighth night and kills the old man, dismembers him, and then buries him in the floor. After the murder, the man claims to continually hear the old man’s heart beat in the floor. Policemen come and search the house, and the narrator ends up confessing to them because he cannot take it anymore. The protagonist begins by gloating on how well he pulled off the murder and how well he is hiding it. As the story unfolds, he begins to get frustrated and angry with the policemen’s supposed dissemblance of the crime (Shen 329).

The psychological state of the murderer is much debated by readers and critics because of all the possibilities of the nature of the crime. Some readers interpret the character and his “acute hearing” and “over acuteness of the senses” to be evidence that he is insane. However, Shen

argues that Poe is simply integrating a supernatural ability into a rational series of events; this characteristic is simply a fact of the story (331). There is evidence to support that the protagonist is not hearing his own heart beat out of nervousness like some readers believe, but really is hearing the heartbeat of the man he killed. First, without being plagued by the sound of the beating heart the protagonist feels relaxed and satisfied. Second, even though the narrator has supernatural senses, earlier in the story he puts his hand on the old man's heart to feel his pulse. Part of the protagonist's acute hearing is hearing things in heaven and on earth, so the fact that he heard the dead man's heart is plausible considering his abilities (Shen 331). Shen said it best in his article: "In other words, Poe ingeniously makes a fantastic fictional fact credible through related realistic details." Though Shen's argument of Poe's integration of fictional facts into reality is plausible, I do not agree with this theory. The narrator shows too many signs of being insane and not simply gifted with supernatural abilities. Poe artfully wrote a thrilling story from the point of view of an insane man, which I believe was his main intent in making the narrator claim he has overly acute senses.

Poe may have been influenced by real life situations in making the main character in "The Tell-Tale Heart" seem insane. Shen believes Poe uses the insanity defense in this short story. During the mid-nineteenth century this was a controversial topic in court because in the early nineteenth century the idea of "partial" or "moral" insanity was ridiculed in court (341 Shen). Moral or partial insanity is the belief that someone can have abnormal emotions and behaviors but also be relatively normal intellectually and without any outstanding insane characteristics. Critics agree that the protagonist of this story was not confessing to the murderer in court, but rather trying to prove his own sanity. In Shen's article he writes that the protagonist displays symptoms of partial insanity, he is rational when telling of his planning and committing

the murder (Shen). On the other hand, the narrator is nervous, paranoid and even says he does not have a rational reason for killing the old man and does not know how the idea got into his head.

Shen's theory of the narrator's partial insanity is extremely useful because it sheds insight on the difficult problem of diagnosing the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart." The narrator is smart enough to recall and explain calmly all his thoughts and actions, but they are not rational to other people even if they are rational to him. The fact that Poe could have based this on the insanity debate leads me to believe he was writing about a character that is partially insane, and what goes on in those people's heads and how they feel. I don't think the narrator really had supernatural hearing, but that it is part of his insanity and auditory hallucinations.

Without a doubt Poe integrates aspects of his own state of mind such as the thoughts of death and the use of supernatural abilities in his stories. It is possible that Poe was using the supernatural characteristics as part of his escape of reality as Braddy believes. I see Poe's life reflected in this story by his understanding of the human mind, and his incredible ability to write from the perspective of an insane man. Poe was constantly plagued with depressive, morbid and anxious thoughts and was able to transform that into a thrilling horror story and create an incredibly intricate character. Evidence of Poe's state in mind can be seen in the letters he wrote to his aunt Maria Clemm and his friend Sarah Whitman. On August 29th, 1835 Poe wrote to his aunt about his grief: "I am blinded with tears while writing this letter — I have no wish to live another hour. Amid sorrow, and the deepest anxiety your letter reached — and you well know how little I am able to bear up under the pressure of grief. My bitterest enemy would pity me could he now read my heart. My last my last my only hold on life is cruelly torn away — I have

no desire to live and will not.” Poe’s letter shows that he was overcome by grief and sorrow which gave him anxiety and no desire to live.

Poe not only expressed his grief in his letters but also his anxiety of his past experiences and dread of the future. Poe wrote to Sarah Helen Whitman in 1848 he was calm and tranquil except for a “strange shadow of evil” which haunted him. Poe wrote Whitman in another letter the same year he was “as calm as I well could be, remembering what has past” and he that he “dreaded the Future”.

The “Tell-Tale Heart” shows how Poe used his personal state of mind to be the devil’s advocate to the other side of all stories- the perpetrator and not the victim. The “Tell-Tale Heart” is not the only story in which aspects Poe’s personal life are displayed.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher” Poe once again uses death, an arguably insane character and narrator, and the supernatural. In the story, a man arrives to the house of Roderick Usher in order to help him with his illness. The narrator arrives to an old, eerie, dark, mysterious house with an equally disturbed host. Usher is tormented by his own fears, is anxious, restless, paranoid, and is incredibly sensitive to all senses. Usher claims he hears things and feels things watching him in the house. Usher’s physical state has also deteriorated so much that the narrator mentions it when first seeing him. Usher is not the only person in the house sick, so is his twin sister Madeline who suffers from an illness, possibly catalepsy. David Butler points out in his article that the narrator in the story mentions Usher being a hypochondriac three times but treats Usher as if he has no doubt he is sick (Butler 1). The narrator diagnoses Usher as a hypochondriac because of his “peculiar combinations of physical and mental complaints as symptomatic of hypochondriasis” (Butler 1). I agree that the narrator thinks of Usher as a

hypochondriac at the beginning, but as the story unfolds the narrator also begins to experience Usher's symptoms, he himself begins to believe Usher and fall into his reality.

Not only was Usher plagued by this illness he claims to have, he also has a fear of death. Usher says in the story he fears most the result of certain events (his and Madeline's death) rather than the events themselves. Usher fears he will not be able to cope with what is to come, he fears fear. Because of this reason Usher buries his sister Madeline in one of her cataclysmic episodes to bury and also keep her to be able to cope with the pain. Lawrence Stahlberg says in his article "The Source of Usher's Fear" that he is most concerned about his spiritual health rather than physical. Because of Usher's "heightened consciousness" he can perceive aspects of existence beyond the range of any normal man (Stahlberg 11). According to Stahlberg, Usher's ambivalence of death is a product of his insanity.

At the beginning of the story when the narrator and friend of Usher arrives at the house, he is seen as the sane, rational one. As mentioned before, the narrator even suggests that Usher is a hypochondriac. The narrator comes as the diagnostician and healer of Usher's illness but ends up failing at both. Sarah Hardy explains that Usher is not the only character that ends up being of questionable mental state, the narrator also goes in a mental decline as the story progresses (160). Hardy states that the narrator is "unable to keep a rational narrative distance from that which he would analyze and cure" (160). The narrator's first act of insanity is helping Usher bury his sister Madeline, and after that begins to question his own sanity. As the story progresses the narrator begins to suffer from Usher's symptoms of insanity (Hardy 164). Poe leaves his readers with the question as to whether either of the characters are actually sane, and if the narrator can be trusted at all. The idea of the story changes depending on which way one reads it. Not only is the

psychological state of the narrator debated, the reasons behind Poe writing this story are also debated.

There are many theories as to what aspects of Poe's life are reflected in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Phillip Young suggests that Poe had an obsession with beautiful dying women which could be because of his past experiences with them: his mother, his foster mother and his wife; this being the reason he includes a dying Madeline in the story. Young also theorizes Usher had an incestuous relationship with his twin sister Madeline, and this reflects Poe's relationship with his young bride (and cousin) Virginia Clemm whom he called "Sis." Though I concede that Poe did have many tragic experiences involving women in his life, I still insist that Poe was not insinuating an incestuous relationship in this story based on his relationship with his young bride. Madeline and Roderick are twins, so their relationship seems to be more of one identity between two people rather than incestuous love.

Another theory is that Poe lived in fear of the future because of what had happened to the women in his life. Meyers theorizes that Poe is plagued by torturing memories of his dead mother and dead wife and he lived with the fear of the same happening to every woman he loved. J. Gerald Kennedy points out that this theory is supported by the fact that Usher buries his sister Madeline. Usher buries his sister knowing of her predisposition to catalepsy to protect himself from what she represents: abandonment, loss, and mortality. I believe Poe liked writing about death, and dead women are a recurring theme in his stories, but I disagree with the belief that is the reason Usher buries Madeline in the story. I think Kennedy is mistaken because he overlooks the obvious of Poe integrating the burial in the story as part of Usher's psychosis.

I believe Poe's tragic past with dying women has influenced his writings and this could be the reason for his reoccurring themes of morbidity and tragic deaths in many of his works.

Some examples of this are his short stories “Ligeia” and “Eleonora” which are about women who die. Poe’s poems “Annabelle Lee” and “The Sleeper” are also about dead women whom he loves, and he writes about loving them in an afterlife.

There are so many theories about Poe’s psychological state and why he was the way he was. Poe is still an intriguing person to speculate about today, simply because his life and his works are so mysterious to us. Not only is Poe a good writer but he incorporates his dark, mysterious and morbid personality into his works. Poe created characters with psychological problems into his stories to create psychological thrillers which make his stories so unique and exciting to read even today. Poe started a new literary genre, but he also inspired modern day horror films. Alfred Hitchcock, a movie director, claimed Poe inspired him: “It’s because I liked Edgar Allan Poe’s stories so much that I began to make suspense films.” Because of Poe’s unique style of writing and choice of themes, we not only have modern day science fiction and detective mystery stories, but also movies of the same genre. Detective, mystery, and science fiction literature and movies would not exist without Poe incorporating his life experiences and personality into his stories.

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