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Psychology in Crime and Confession: A Critical Study into Poe's Short Stories *the Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*

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Abstract

*Psychology, crime and confession are the three essential ingredients of some of Poe's greatest short stories. It is undoubtedly his credit that far before the introduction of psychology in legal studies and its related issues, Poe has used psychology and its associated structures like confession in his short stories that could be explored in its various theoretical and epistemological issues. His two great short stories *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*, on the other hand cannot be bound into a single term of either crime or horror stories in the technical sense. These multifaceted stories, which could even be termed as a new subgenre, consisting of a classical mixing of crime, horror and detection, establish Poe as the introducer and one who has perfected this new genre. The present study aims to locate these fundamental issues of psychology, crime and confession in these two stories as a critical approach to deal with.*

Keywords: *psychology, crime, confession, Poe, short story, subgenre.*

The straightforward answer to the question, what is crime, would be nothing except crime is something that is against the law. But through ages, different sociological, economical, psychological dimensions have been steadily attached to it that make the otherwise clear term a little evocative and illusionary that escapes the layman's touch. For the decades and years, academics from various disciplines have strived to feel and understand the various nuances of this question and its answers in relation. Following the research work of different criminologists and sociologists like Taylor, Walton and

Young etc., it becomes rather impossible to justify the question with a brief definition like the previous one. The Factual Theory defines it, "crime is an intentional act or omission in violation of criminal law (statutory or case law), committed without defense or justification, and sanctioned by the state as a felony or misdemeanor" (Tappan, *Crime, Justice and Correction*, 1996, 10), and Durkheim propounded the paradigm of this theory. On the other hand, the Normative Theory tries to find it in the features of the behaviors, reasons, that might justify treating one as criminal. Whatever it may



be, crime is above all and most clearly a behavior and thus it is inevitable that psychology has a larger role to play in its various theoretical and epistemological debates.

It was only in the year 1889 that the Psychology students were commencing to take courses that are related to law like Crime and Modern Theories of the Criminal etc., and it was Hugo Munsterberg (1863-1916) who pioneered the study of the application of criminal psychology in research and its related theories. But Bersoff points out that, American psychologists did not readily embrace the study of legal issues. It was in the 1960s that psychologists were being asked to advise and make predictions of dangerousness and to make different clinical assessments relevant to insanity defense pleas and to assess its factual relevancy in points of psychology. 1980s show a rapid development in this field and law, criminal justice, social science, psychology had become more and more involved in this field, evolving into a specialized training. As Bersoff, Ogloff and Tomkins pointed out that nearly three quarters of a century, from the time that Munsterberg had called for an application of psychology to law, his call had been answered.

Crime has never the less been the foundation for an entire genre of fiction for more than one hundred and fifty years. Moreover it is also a fact that the centrality of crime to a genre with all its diversities defies any simple classification. History of literature testifies that various titles have been constructed to classify this genre as for example Poe's tales of ratiocination to the mystery and detective fiction in the last portion of the 20th century and the

whodunit of the period between the two great wars. But the process of investigation and its associated facts were always a central point. Sayers points out in this context, "Both the detective-story proper and pure tale of horror are very ancient in origin. All native folk-lore has its ghost tales. While the first four detective stories ... hail respectively from the Jewish, Apocrypha, Herodotus, and the Aeneid. But, whereas the tale of horror has flourished in practically every age and country, the detective story has had a spasmodic history, appearing here and there in faint, tentative sketches and episodes" (Sayers 1992, 72).

Among major writers of American renaissance, Edgar Allan Poe is the most appealing to psychoanalysts as well as literary critics for the psychoanalytic persuasion and above all he is possibly the first writer of crime story, who stresses the importance of psychology in the field of crime and its relevancy in order of detection quite consciously. Jorge Luis Borges, the Latin American writer has recognized Poe as effectively the originator of the detective story quite pertinently. In his *An Introduction to American Literature*, he writes that "Poe's tales of intellect inaugurates new genre, the detective story, which has conquered the world," (Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 1971, 23) and he further adds, "In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe enriched literature with a new genre. This genre is above all ingenious ... real crimes are not commonly discovered by abstract reasoning but by chance, investigation or confession..." (Borges 1971, 80). Whatever may be the justification of Borges' argument, the fact is that Poe has stressed the very importance of the



psychological aspects of confession in his detective stories or crime stories. For both Poe and Borges, the detective story stands as a formal antithesis of the chaos of human experience. Chaos is often attributed as the informing principle of a universe whose most notorious attribute is complexity. In this case reason is seen as the direct antithesis of chaos, which is something devoid of reason. Poe's crime and detective stories at least focus on the very need of reason in human world because inherently they are thoroughly imbued with the structural ingredients of psychology which is another attribute of reason.

The general critical consensus is that the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, the father of detective genre. Crime fiction however of which Poe's detective stories form a subject, has a much earlier origin and however it could also be said in this context that he is also the first to mingle these and to create another new genre-the mixture of crime and horror where psychology and its relevance in pointing out the detection has been used and improvised. As for the present study Poe's two short stories *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat* (1843) has been chosen, for these two stories reflect the ultimate classical exposition of the new genre that Poe had created.

Poe is sometime regarded like an alien presence in the first generation of professional American authors. While a scholar scolded him in 1835 for the disgusting particulars of one of his early tales, he rather detachedly enumerated the narrative technique that he employed and which he meant to exploit "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque, the fearful colored into horrible; the witty

exaggerated into burlesque; the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical" (E. A. Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1948, 57). Poe tried to achieve fame by shocking the public because to appreciate the work one has to read at least.

Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a gripping tale that demonstrates Poe's criteria to shock the readers to the extreme so that he cannot escape the story. The very opening of the story seems to be a kind of focal motif of the story like Shakespeare's opening scenes, foretelling what to come. "True! - nervous-very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am;..." (Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 2006, 187), the narrator says. Yes, and who can deny the very same state of his readers while going through this story? The author very skillfully denies the charge of insanity on the part of narrator and on the other hand tries hard to establish the abstract reasoning of the whole story by stressing out, "How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily -how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (Poe, 2006,187). It's his artistic technique to establish control over readers while delineating a seemingly unbelievable story by the very process of reasoning and intellect, its demand of a structure, a firm one that could not be altogether termed as a mere fantasy and idiotic tale.

The first person narrator firmly denies any other objective except the old man's eyes that possibly drives him into the frenzy of murder. He said, "I loved the old man. He had never wronged me...For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eyes! Yes it was this!" (187), the point is that one of the old man's eyes resembled that of a vulture according to the narrator



and whenever it fell upon the narrator, his blood ran cold. So, slowly by degree he made elaborate procedure to kill the old man, like practicing through almost a week at the midnight to turn the latch of the door and slowly thrusting his body into the room, slowly and cautiously as not to awake the man. He emphasizes upon the process-how cunningly and dexterously, he carves all this and asks the reader rather amusingly, "Would a madman have been so wise as this?" (188), but the problem remains with the eye, it remains closed as to elude the narrator from any further provocation and the result remains is that the supposed and intended deed remains unaccomplished. The innovation of the story is that with all its genre, subgenre and philosophy, it remains a masterpiece of narrative art and the narrator as if always conversing with the reader, trying to clear even the slightest vagueness that they might attribute, justify the breaks between the activities and thoughts that they might term as insane or incomplete and thus always providing the psychological reasons behind his acts. On the eighth night the deed has been done. The old man startled at the noise of opening door, becomes awake. The narrator opened the crevice of the lantern stealthily so to open a very little crevice in the lantern and a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell on the vulture eye of the old man. The man's beatings of heart further encouraged the narrator like a soldier is incensed by the beatings of a drum at war time. He was killed, the narrator felt complacent that "His eye would trouble me no more" (190).

He wisely removed all signs of the murder and deposited the body into the

flooring of the chamber. He becomes satiated and quite complementary at his own sagacity, how wisely and cunningly all had been done. The police came at the end of the night being informed by the neighbors when they had heard a shriek at night, the narrator very gladly and confidently, "bade them search –search well" (190). He exclaimed, "I led them, at length to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room and desired them here to rest, from their fatigues..." (190) and he himself placed his own seat just beneath the reposed corpse, corpse of the victim. But soon a dull sound began to disturb him. It was a dull, quick sound-like the sound of a watch, enveloped in cotton and the noise steadily increased as deemed by the narrator. He exclaimed, "It grew louder-louder-louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled, was it possible they heard not? Almighty god! – no, no! They heard!-they suspected!-they knew!-they were making a mockery of my horror! ...I must scream or die! and now-again!-hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!" (191) and he finally broke to confess, "Villains! ...dissemble no more! I admit the deed!-tear up the planks!-here, here!-it is the beating of his hideous heart!" (191)

The Black Cat, despite of having its supernatural atmosphere and its colored mystery and its obvious lacking of scientific abstract reasoning that the first discussed story had remains a masterpiece in its own accord in Poe's newly innovated mixing of horror and crime story and it's detection. In the earlier story as we have seen narrator's repeated claim and urge to establish a kind of reason and sanity over



the whole structure of the story, here he clearly admits, “For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither except nor solicit belief” (192). So, it becomes not Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief” but how we can claim utter disbelief as the narrator urges and terms his story as “most homely narrative” (192). In the first paragraph we have witnessed his hectic urge to establish a kind of reason in the story as he had repeatedly and freely use the words like ‘mere household events’, ‘commonplace’, ‘calm’, ‘logical’ etc. and say, “..I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (192). The story is of a gentleman who was once fond of animal, had become perverse as this is also one of the undeniable human traits and perhaps a little bit of alcohol, killed Pluto, the black cat by hanging. In the sequence of the story, the narrator left no stone unturned to establish the possible reason in the story as he says, “I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts” (195) and wish that nothing left ‘imperfect’. This line is further extended when the narrator tried to establish the reason behind the image of the cat with a rope on its neck, imprinted on the only wall that escaped complete annihilation at the very night the cat had been murdered. The narrator though struck with wonder and terror, tried to establish reason by pointing out every possibility that upon the fire alarm, the garden had been immediately filled by crowd and someone of them must have cut the hanged animal from the tree and thrown it inside the window to awaken the asleep narrator and

“The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the live of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had been accomplished the portraiture as I saw it” (195).

The narrator soon gets another black cat as to alleviate and as a mark of repentance of his misdeed. But again soon the same misdeeds ensued. He becomes disgusted with the cat and he picked up an axe to kill it but was prevented by his wife and out of mad rage, he buried the axe in her brain. The process of hiding the body is same as of the previous story. He deposited the body into the wall. Police came and after the through search, found nothing to suspect murder. The narrator pleased with his ingenuity and triumph of his deed, said, “I delight to have allayed your suspicion. I wish you all health, and little mere courtesy. By the bye, gentlemen, this-this is a very well constructed house...These walls-are you going gentlemen?-these walls are solidly put together” (200). In sheer enthusiasm he rapped heavily with his cane at the very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of his wife’s bosom and he was answered immediately by a voice within the tomb, a cry muffled and broken, like sobbing of a child and then a long continuous scream utterly anomalous and inhuman howl, half of sorrow and half of triumph. The police party toiled with the wall and the crime was discovered.

Confessions have played a very important role in human history mainly in the three venues like religion, psychotherapy and criminal justice. In criminal law, confession is a prosecutor’s most powerful weapon that the introduction of a confession can positively



make the other aspects of a trial in the court something superfluous. Kassin and McNall point out two approaches in this context. One is to exercise power and other is to befriend and sympathize with the suspect by suggesting that the crime may be provoked or instigated by the victim and it may be an accident. These techniques may lead the suspect to anticipate leniency and which may provide an instrument to confess. Research shows that these techniques are often been used in criminal investigation. In these two stories Poe has also used these techniques to lead the crime to expose. The police's behavior is something that shows no suspicion as to relieve the killer from any perceived apprehension of danger and the confession ensues. Though there are some supernatural causes as the narrator stresses out but the psychological points regarding confession cannot be denied either. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator says, "they knew!-they were making a mockery of my horror!" (191) and in *The Black Cat*, the narrator seeing the calmness and satisfaction of the police rapped heavily with his cane on that very portion where he has deposited the body of his wife that ultimately brings the crime into light.

We should not go into the details of the horror and chilling terror of these stories, but the point is that in both these stories the author has used the confession as the disclosing factor of the crime and though we may sometime feel perplexed as to whether term these stories as crime story or horror story. Perhaps Poe has established a new tradition and subgenre of horror-crime story in this age. But where in the first story it was a blank direct confession on the part of the narrator, the doer of the crime, enabling the police to catch him, in the second story, it was an indirect expression that calls back the denizens of after death, victimized unnecessarily, to arise and to enable the police party to catch the guilty. Whatever may be the cause, it cannot be denied that Poe, the night man of American literature has very successfully and methodically used the psychological techniques to establish his point and the supposed reason of the story that we can never term these stories as utterly incredible. It is perhaps his biggest point of triumph and moreover much before the use of psychology in crime, law and detection, he has used it in these two stories, it can't be denied either.

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