

Looking Both Ways: Dualities in “The Raven”

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe’s main contribution to literature is in how he utilized the psychological horrors often found in individuals in extraordinarily bizarre circumstances. Many of his works breathed life into the horror genre by de-delineating the age-old polarities of good/evil, sane/insane, wonder/terror. He tore down and reconstructed the dualities within the single mind, and often redrew the always fluid lines between the inner and outer worlds, between the horror of the mind gone awry and the normalcy often we see on the outside. Much earlier delves into the human psyche and its effects on character development and literary tension are plentiful and useful in our discourse here. Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” as well as Mordechai Marcus’ psychological character study of Herman Melville’s short story, “Bartleby” are two primary sources we can draw from when making the jump to the psychologically shaken protagonist in Poe’s “The Raven.”

KEYWORDS: Edgar Allan Poe, psychological duality, gothic, horror, literature, short story.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mordechai Marcus’ study titled “Melville’s Bartleby as a Psychological, Double” is relevant to this paper because it renders a concise picture of the nature of psychological dualities. Marcus postulates that Bartleby “is a psychological double for the story’s nameless-narrator” (Marcus 366). Poe’s “The Raven” may also be seen as having a “psychological double” in the raven and the narrator; flip-sides of the same coin. It is insufficient to focus only on the psychological dualities that exist in “The Raven.” Thus, this study will look at the dualistic world view found in the romantic notions of art, truth, and the divine and how these notions were borrowed from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” We shall examine how these constructions serve as a binary-model foundation upon which we may interpret the issue of dualism in “The Raven.”

II. LITERARY BACKGROUND

The romantic stance in literature rests on the idea that though humanity is mostly tied-down to the mundane and the physical, we are occasionally allowed a glimpse of the spiritual or the divine; of heaven. This stance is taken from *The Republic*, in which Plato uses the “allegory of the cave,” to describe the philosophical underpinnings of, and relationships between our world/heaven, man/God, and truth/untruth. This paper shall examine the dualistic world view found in Edgar Allan Poe’s introspective poem “The Raven.” Joseph Moldenhauer calls Edgar Allan Poe a “neo-Platonic visionary.” Plato’s allegory is simple yet profound. It is simple exactly because it is an allegory, “a sustained metaphor.” Plato asserts that humanity lives in a cave and that sunlight can only be seen when a person ventures up out of the cave through an upwardly curving tunnel. This person who has bothered to make the journey up onto surface is the poet and thus, it is the poet that creates for us these glimpses of heaven because he carries what he has seen back down into the cave to show his fellow cave dwellers. The sun then is never directly visible to people except as shards or slivers of light filtered down a deep tunnel. With the exception of the poet or artist, all other people look toward the opposite wall of the cave, believing, as truth, the shadows their bodies have created on that wall through the filtered-down light of the unimaginable sun.

The profundity of this allegory is this: people have mistakenly construed as truths, what are in fact, shadows and illusions. Thus, we are presented two separate and distinct worlds through the “allegory of the cave.” These are: our tragically imperfect (this) world and the perfect beauty of a heavenly, divine (that) world. On another less esoteric level, we may assert that *this* world is the one in which we now live is the scientific, rational world. The oppositional *that* world would then have to be thought of as the world of classical Rome and Greece. To go a step further, this misconstrued truth, or illusion, can be discussed in psychological terms because despite the macro-societal scale that the illusion in the allegory alludes to, these same illusions may also be found within the individual mind, grasping in the dark and finding nothing but shadows.

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” contains, on many different levels, elements of this dualistic

worldview or philosophy. Like most other romantic poems, in “The Raven,” the narrator’s (poet’s) consciousness attempts to bridge the gap between the binary worlds presented to him, but the similarity stops there as, in the end, he fails to do so and ultimately goes insane. What the narrator attempts to do, in this poem, mirrors what the romantic poet and the classical philosopher tried to do; that is, they all would like to see the sun, to gain knowledge of divine truth. In “The Raven” the narrator attempts a negotiation of these separate worlds through reason and self-reflection. However, by focusing his attention on these two divergent yet relevant worlds, he is unaware that there is a third, more relevant world; the inner world of his own mind. In other words, the narrator of “The Raven” believes himself to be looking out of the cave at an externally manifested ‘reality’ but the third-person perspective of the reader realizes that he is actually looking back into the shadow-filled inner sanctum of that cave, seeing, in fact, not only the illusory shadow of a false ‘reality,’ but the very real shadow of his own twisted mind. In “Poe and the Powers of the Mind,” Robert Shulman provides a model for the illusory nature of our delusional narrator.

Poe has real insight into that basically irrational strategy by which the mind attempts to preserve itself from its own forces of madness, disease, and disintegration by rigidly isolating itself and by assuming that the threat is external when in fact it is internal. (Shulman 248)

Thus, we may speculate that the narrator assumes that the raven is a threat and that it is perceived as coming from an external source when, in fact, it is internally conceived. There must be a clear discernment of what the raven actually is. More importantly, we must formulate an idea of what the raven signifies to the narrator. From textual evidence, it may be posited that the raven can be one of two things: a pure figment of the imaginatively delusional mind of the narrator, or an actual, physically-real raven. If the second scenario holds true, is the raven actually replying “nevermore” rather than merely doing what ravens normally do, that is, squawking? Can the oversensitivity of the narrator’s mind possibly misconstrue a simple, meaningless raven’s squawking into a deep, dreadful psychological canyon of meaning and context?

Delving into this matter of whether the raven is itself an actual raven or a mere figment of imagination, it is necessary to analyze the text itself. Whether or not the raven actually says “nevermore” should also be analyzed textually. The first stanza opens up the narrator’s “weak and weary” state of mind as he sits alone in his “chamber.” The narrator is stirred from a nap by a “rapping...tapping” and when he goes to see who it is, there is no one there. The narrator is quite forlorn and despondent over a lost love, Lenore. With a state of mind ripe for the oncoming of mental duress and illness, the narrator begins the poem by experiencing auditory hallucination. Moreover, the mere “rustling” of a curtain causes his to be “filled” with “fantastic terrors never felt before” (Poe, line 14). Obviously, he is extremely sensitive, perhaps overly sensitive to auditory stimulation. This oversensitivity seems to be a product of the narrator’s loneliness, isolation, depression and perhaps sleep-deprivation (he is in fact, awoken by the first “tapping...rapping”).

On first seeing the raven, the narrator gives us clues as to his mental state. He not only considers this animal in terms of human-to-human customs and thoughts, he has already projected his own inner misgivings, and frailties upon this mere animal. “Not the least obeisance made he” (Poe 39). It is absurd to even mention the fact that a *bird* had not bowed to him, as this is the custom of *men*. Though already begun before the start of the poem, the narrator’s mental collapse is demonstrable and quick, and is expressed through the interaction he has with the raven. To clarify, what is more important to this discussion is not exactly in how he interacts but in what drives his thoughts as he interacts with the raven. In another absurd moment, the narrator addresses the bird as he would a newly-met gentleman but with a dark twist. He says “Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore” (Poe 49)! What I propose is that here, the narrator is speaking to himself and his own dark, “Plutonian shore.” The raven’s answer, “Nevermore,” is nonsense and should be considered as such by the narrator. In this respect, at first, he appears still to have somewhat of a hold on his mental faculties, thinking about the raven’s answer. Though he reasons correctly that “Though its answer little meaning- little relevancy bore,” he loses all semblance of reason two lines down as he has already accepted the fact that this strange raven has given him his name, “Nevermore” (Poe 50,51). The tenth stanza illuminates further the narrator’s isolation and depression. The narrator projects his own loneliness on the raven “sitting lonely” and believing that the raven had poured out “his soul in that one word” (Poe 56). The narrator mutters “Other friends have flown before” to illustrate his loneliness. He equates past friends leaving him with his new friend, the raven and assumes that his new friend will also leave him. The raven answers on cue, “Nevermore.” The narrator then resorts to an analysis of what the raven means by his “aptly spoken” replies of “Nevermore.” The tone is changed quite dramatically from a slightly detached and objective relationship between man and raven into an inwardly-facing tirade supposedly directed at the outward figure of the raven. A forceful and all-encompassing vortex is created in the narrator and he connects his lost love Lenore with the coming of the raven. Until now, our narrator has experienced auditory as well as visual hallucinations. As he thinks “the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer,” he has now crawled into the hole of olfactory hallucinations. He then wishes for death or at least oblivion from his inner turmoil and pain. “... is there balm in Gilead” (Poe 89)? Is there “...respite and Nepenthe from thy memories Lenore” (Poe 82)?

Our narrator’s journey into madness moves quickly and definitively. The raven is called a “prophet”, a “thing of evil” as the narrator’s voice becomes filled with terror. In the final and most profound stanza, the raven has still not budged from his place on top of the “bust of Pallas” as the narrator goes completely insane. His insanity, though focused on the external raven figure, is caused by his inability to realize that his experiences are hallucinatory, and that he is, in fact, raving to himself about himself. Ernest Wolf’s article, “Psychoanalytical Psychology of the Self and Literature,” provides a term for what has happened to our narrator. He explains Kohut’s “concept of the “selfobject” in the following lines:...vicarious introspection leads to the conceptualization of the empirical finding that certain aspects of what objectively is observed as the environment by the self as part of itself. Selfobjects are those aspects of the environment that at the same time are part of the self. (Wolf 43)

In Wolf’s explanation, we may deduce that the “selfobject” for the narrator was the raven. However, when the raven is considered not part of the environment but a projection of the narrator’s mind onto the environment, the raven becomes less a “selfobject” and more of what may be termed a *selfself*, a dualistic or binary self. This point is very important because now we have moved beyond Plato’s allegory of the cave and the romantic notions of art and poetry. We have entered into concepts of the duality of fragmentation of the individual mind and its significance within our discussion of glimpsing divinity. Herein lies the fundamental question; has Poe shown, through the journey and consequent splintering of the narrator’s mind, an Emersonian-like perspective on divinity and God? To clarify, is the quest for answers within one’s own mind, just as or even more critical than asking the poet to go peek outside of the cave in search for truth? Is, then, the selfobject not merely a reflection of the self, but rather, a reflection of God?

III. CONCLUSION

Returning to our discussion of Plato’s “allegory of the cave,” we can see now that though the narrator believes himself to be seeing the divine sunlight outside of “the cave,” he is really looking back towards the shadows of that cave. Through the raven, he imagines other worldly concepts such as “Pluto, God, Aidenn,” and demons and considers them part of his reality, his glimpse of divinity. In fact, the narrator’s journey into madness may be interpreted as a journey to find himself, to find his “selfobject.”

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