

Edgar Allan Poe and Perversity: The protagonists' troubled psyche obsessive desire for unity in the service of an aesthetic unity.

Submitted by: Gadi (Gedalyah Strusberg)

Edgar Allan Poe's short stories "The Black Cat" (1843), "The Tell – Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) corroborate to express the narrators' perversity as a mental abnormality which drives them to obsessively look for unity to be achieved through death narrows gaps of separation and lack of understanding. Simultaneously, this same obsession for unity has an aesthetic value in these short stories for creating aesthetic unity. Perversity is embedded in unity.

What underlies Poe narrators' perversity in the above stories is, according to the psychological perspective suggested by Davidson (189) and Kennedy (542), an inner psychological compulsion according to which one feels he is forced to do evil, and be caught, punished, and suffer for it. But not only that, this compulsion goes much further, as the compulsion to be punished and suffer might aims at self and other's death. This is further supported by Kennedy (4) who asserts that perversity is the expression of a compulsive attraction towards death, including the compulsion to inflict death upon oneself and another.

According to Peeples, (626), unlike another writers, Poe puts in his fiction a great deal of emphasis on perversity, and emphasizes another connected variables, as (among others) obsession and self-destructive tendencies. These variables are especially manifest in Poe's stories so clearly and horribly.

It is important to stress already here, that perversity as such, besides being an exploration of the protagonists' troubled psyche aspiring unification with the other which causes them despair, serves as a mean for aesthetic unity.

Unity:

Namely, Gothic horror strives to arise an “intense emotion as an authentic source of [aesthetic](#) experience” through evil, which, as will be shown, connects with perversity.

According to Charles E. May (69), what makes Poe's version of the Gothic special is his usage of perversity: in Poe's works, perversity (as a theme of psychological obsession), which is embodied in a first – person narrator, is used as a mean for fostering the tightness and thereby the coherent development of the aesthetic unity of the short story.

Poe's unique contribution is harnessing perversity, on its obsessiveness in the service of unity effect – this is what he renews/adds in his writing to what already exists in Gothic horror.

Poe, as expressing the Romantic perspective desires to create a literary pleasure, in the sense that literature should inspire deeply felt emotional responses in man. Indeed, like the romanticism, Gothic horror emphasized intense emotions as an authentic root of [aesthetic](#) experience. He does it by putting new stress on emotions like: in the form of terror and thrill by its emphasis on taboo subjects, such as satanism and matters of the occult, that both captured and repelled away the polite English society. Moreover, [horror, terror](#), and awe, human existential alienation, [apprehension](#).

This way, contently: by joints efforts, Poe fulfills the unity principle, which aimed at the goal of arising inspiration which is done through addressing sublimity via death and life. Formly:

The unity of effect, according to?, is a writing method that can generate an emotional response in the readers. Edgar Allan Poe believed that we are able to identify specific common characteristics features of writing which bears an emotional effect on the reader. But not only that, Poe developed an approach for writing which can help the writer involve and arise the emotions of his readers. This approach is actually the unity of effect. Poe laboured to write a work that draws forth beauty and gives rise emotion. For this aim, Poe promoted what is called the unity of effect in writing. Indeed, in spite of the romantic conviction of writers as being struck by inspiration, still, most of them must have some sort of structure in guiding them in composition of their work. The unity of effect is a method that Poe uses in his own writing. It establishes what effect a writer would like to have on the reader and how implementing that effect via all the elements of the work. Namely, the effect on the reader is, essentially, the purpose of the work. It demands consistency. According to?. The unity of effect is like a target. Each concentric circle focuses the writer's writing down to a point - the bullseye. When every factor of the writing is focused on to a consistent point, then the work hits the bullseye. Poe concludes that length, "unity of effect" and a logical method are important characteristics of a good writing. Poe's essay asserts Poe's conviction that a work of fiction should be written only after the author has decided how it is to be ended, and which [emotional](#) reaction, or "effect", the writer wishes to create, commonly known as the "unity of effect." Once this effect has been determined, the writer has to take decision regarding all other aspects regarding the

composition of the work, including [tone](#), [theme](#), [setting](#), [characters](#), [conflict](#), and [plot](#).

[The bullseye is intense feelings following crossing the border between life towards death accomplished by death towards which perversity so faithfully leads.](#)

As an obsession, aimed at death only, perversity allows such aesthetic unity.

Indeed, That is to say that, according to May (69), Poe's narrators, haunted by perversity, are obsessed with the theme of their story (The black cats who love the narrator and constantly look for his affection actually agonize him terribly in "The Black cat", and the old man's eye in "The Tell – Tale Heart) to such an extent that the obsession per se, as a prominent corollary of perversity, becomes the thematic center of the story and thus fosters the story's tight aesthetic unity. Here, psychological aberration is corroborated by Poe at the service of the unity of his literary work.

Indeed, the above definition of perversity appears in "The Black Cat": "Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not?. Here, the obsession "found himself" to do evil "committing a vile or silly action" is expressed. Moreover, in *The Black Cat*: "It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex itself* – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong's sake only – that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute" (p.103). Here, the compulsion's inclination to expand even towards inflicting even death is expressed: "to offer violence to its own nature". Similarly, in The "Imp of The Perverse", a similar definition appears: the narrator calls it: "principle of human nature" (p.121). Namely, like Davidson and Kennedy,

perversity has a pattern, it is a regularity. In “The Black Cat”: “One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree. hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; - hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence...hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin – a deadly sin” (p.103). Here, evil and destruction are expressed. The protagonist kills his cat who loves him for no reason. His tears and remorse emphasizes this perversity’s compulsive nature. However, compulsion drives the protagonists towards one direction only, namely: evil and destruction. This one – way course, beside depicting the protagonists’ abnormal souls, enables unity of effect because it allows focusing on approaching to destruction and death without digression from this bullseye.

Poe’s short stories under discussion testify to the above obsession embedded in perversity. In “The Imp of The Perverse”, perhaps the most theoretical among the stories under discussion, it is said: “There is no passion in nature so demonically impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge” (p.123). “Passion...so demonically impatient” suggests the incessant power perversity bears in one’s soul. By the same token, in “The Imp of The Perverse”, it is noticed: “absolutely irresistible” (p.122). Similarly, it is said there in “The Imp of The Perverse”: “It harassed because it haunted” (p.124). Namely, perversity is an obsessive power which does not give up, and, at least in the stories under discussion, it is at work until it eventually successfully drives its victim towards its ultimate end: death. Another example, in the “The Tell – Tale Heart”, the narrator testifies: “It is impossible to say how first the idea [the idea regarding ?] entered my brain, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night” (p. 98). In “The Black Cat”, an additional aspect is disclosed: “The fury of a

demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin – nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame” (p.103). That is to say, perversity obsessively drives one to behave in a way totally antagonistic to what he uses and wants to be, “My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body”. This further emphasizes that perversity’s evil and obsessive essence, by repeatedly leading one towards its own and others death.

But not only that, perversity’s obsession does not only take the form of an incessant stimuli towards death, but also takes to form of an obsessive need to repeat one’s own actions. The compulsion to repeat which perversity entails unfolds in the stories, for example, while the narrator in "The Tell – Tale Heart" secretly enters the old man's room night after night with the lamp in his hand, not to mention his compulsion to repeat actions that might reveal that he is a murderer. The later appears also and in “The Imp of The Perverse”. Interestingly, the narrator in "The Black Cat" adopts a second cat. This, according to Fred Botting (3843) is for inertia. Namely, it stems, interestingly, out of a drive ‘to restore an earlier state of things’. An earlier state of things, most probably refers to nothingness, namely, the times when things did not exist yet, namely, absence of life, i.e., death. Therefore, it is understood why, according to Fred Botting (308– 11), it is the drive of life to return to a state of ‘inertia’, namely, to death: By adopting a second cat, the protagonist re-experiences thereby his misery and deadly anger towards it, which is aimed again at its destruction. Furthermore, the obsessive need to repeat one’s own actions necessarily makes him clumsier and this way more susceptible to get caught which further entangles him by getting caught and suffering death sentence. For example, in the “The Tell – Tale Heart”: “And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it” (p.98 and, similarly, in “The

Tell – Tale Heart”: “every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept” (p.99).

This compulsive nature of perversity enables the aesthetic unity as it requires a tight and persistent achievement of the bullseye above.

Scott Peeples (1028) mentions Benfey, according to whom the stories under discussion can be explained in terms of two closely related fears. It seems that perversity lies on these fears, and, as will be further explained, these fears help understand perversity’s death as a solution destined to overcome these fears. First, the fear of being misunderstood. Indeed, the narrators are motivated by a strong and compulsive need to explain themselves and to be considered as sane, not mad. For instance: In “The Tell – Tale Heart”: “I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! And observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story” (p. 98). Similarly, in “The Black Cat”, the narrator claims: “Yet, mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream” (p.101). Facing this fear, the protagonists (as will be shown below) aspire unity with the others (to be achieved through destruction, namely, death) as a mean to alleviate their misery. But not only that, this protagonists’ obsessive desire to be understood fosters the unity effect, as it ensures clarity and tangibility, and prevents misunderstandings and deviations regarding how the protagonists act to achieve unity.

Second, the fear of being secluded, separated, namely, alienated from other people. This fear refers to a situation in which there is no possibility that one can know for sure what another person feels and thinks. For example, the eye of the old man in “The Tell – Tale Heart”, which horrifies the protagonist and acts to separate the old man from him. Another example, the two cats in “The Black Cat” whose fondness and strong desire to become intimate with the narrator, paradoxically, distress him and urge him to detach from them. Indeed, these protagonists’ thought

of their separateness is unbearable for them. Both these stories start with this distress. In “The Tell – Tale Heart”: “his Evil eye” (p. 98) and: “Whenever it [the old man’s eye] fell upon me, my blood ran cold (p. 31, Kindle), and: “absolute *dread* of the beast [the black cat]” (p.105) and: “the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me” (p.105). Here, totality and obsession are prominent: “absolute *dread* of the beast” and “Whenever it [the old man’s eye] fell upon me”. These expressions of obsession embodied in perversity facing separateness and alienation guarantee unity, as the protagonists, obsessive ridden, are entrenched in these thoughts and therefore are not able to go astray. This way, the protagonists’ troubled psyche serves as a narratological tool for remaining focusing on the bullseye.

Perversity leads to self-destruction and death of the narrator himself and other characters whom he kills. Indeed, self – destruction unfolds in “The Imp of The Perverse”: “I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty, confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered – and beckoned me on to death” (124). Here, by openly confessing his own crime, even without a pressing need, the narrator deliberately consigns himself to death penalty by admitting he murdered, “confess the murder of which I had been guilty - and beckoned me on to death”. The mere compulsion to destroy himself through death is evident here too, “confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered”. In “The Imp of The Perverse”: “brief but pregnant sentence [?] that consigned me to the hangman and to hell” (p. 125). In “The Imp of The Perverse”: “Having related all that was necessary for the fullest judicial conviction, I fell prostrate in a swoon” (p.125).

Facing these fears, the death which perversity embodies, serves as an outlet for the protagonists, as through it, following Moldenhauer they can overcome them.

Moldenhauer (292) claims, that the ruin (or wish for ruin) of the victims in the stories means the union with him in death. In the stories under discussion, the victims are the narrator's black two cats and his wife (in "The Black Cat"), and old man in "The Tell – Tale Heart" and "The Imp of Perversity"). They are victims because, as the source of the feeling of distress caused by feelings of separation and misunderstanding, they, according to the logic of perversity, have to be annihilated, at least in their mundane, physical existence. Indeed, this desire for union as an abnormal psychological need, serves also the aesthetic unity of the stories under discussion through its tight and consistent progress dictated by its compulsive nature.

But what exactly is the nature Poe's union aimed by his protagonists' perversity?. Moldenhauer (296) explains, as follows: "Death, for Poe's haunted heroes is truly a well – wrought urn: simultaneously a poem, a tomb, and a bridal chamber – a private place for souls finally joined after long and agonizing alienation". Namely, according to Moldenhauer, death enables, at least in fiction, not in reality, joining together characters who, otherwise, could not have been act together due to their mundane life circumstances, which normally act to separate them (for example, social status, place of living). Namely, death breaks the mundane, social and inter – personal gaps which act to separate people from one another and causes misunderstandings among them.

It seems that death unites also because it reduces life into its most basic and universal elements. All living creatures die and decompose to basic units from which all living creatures are made. Nature has a cyclic process in which the living creatures re – use these elementary units for their own life. In this way, union with others can be achieved, if not in the mundane incarnation of their life, it can be achieved following death, at least when life does not exist in their known mundane

form. This idea also can explain the narrator's compulsion in the stories to hand over themselves after committing the killings: since they feel detached from themselves and feel separation from others, they, through perversity, try to overcome it by death, which by destroying life, actually overcomes this separation, as it reduces it to basic universal units we all share. This way it enables them union, though based on different basis, with others and themselves. Indeed, in "The Tell – Tale Heart", the narrator proclaims: "His eyes would trouble me no more" (p.100).

Death as a solution is expressed in "The Tell – Tale Heart": "But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!" (p.101). Furthermore, in "The Tell – Tale Heart": "I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (98).

One's destruction of himself and other's by death allows to overcome the above misunderstanding and separateness as such destruction breaks these gaps between human beings. Indeed, according to Moldenhauer (296), existing gaps are a products of status – quo. Therefore, everything which enables annulling these gaps in the way towards unity, namely, everything which is an antithesis to the status – quo (for example, disease, decay, alienation is necessary for achieving this unity. These antithetical elements are necessary because they bring death which signifies the ruin of these mundane gaps, expressions of the status - quo during human's life. Moreover, according to Moldenhauer (296), these antithetic forces strongly desire a world outside of nature and normal humanity, outside of the regular social interactions.

The eagerness for narrowing these gaps has a strong expression in the stories. In "The Imp of The Perverse": "But why shall I say more? To – day I wear these

chains, and am *here*! Tomorrow I shall be fetterless! – *but where?*” (p.125).

“Chains” and “fetterless” suggest a feeling of separation and of being misunderstood, expressing Moldenhauer above mentioned sources for fears that underlie perversion. A more concrete expression of feeling of separation and the desire to overcome it is to be found In “The Black Cat”: “At such times, although I longed to destroy it [cat] with a blow” (p.105). In addition, in “The Black Cat”: “I...firmly resolved to put it [cat] to death” (p.107). The desire to “destroy” his cat expresses the need to overcome the gap of separateness which prevents the protagonist from establishing a peaceful and harmonious relationship with it. It is as if the protagonist believes that by killing his cat he can overcome the cat’s mundane incarnation which poses separateness between them. The desire to overcome separateness and misunderstanding by destruction is expressed very figuratively in “The Tell – Tale Heart”: “First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs” (p.100). The old man’s existence, and more specifically, his eye, makes the narrator feel terribly separate and therefore, renders his life into hell. Facing this misery, the mechanism of perversity as is discussed above, urges the narrator to annihilate the old man’s eye existence. This actual destruction of the old man is aimed at overcoming separation, thereby unity can be achieved. Since the old man’s body, and more specifically, his eye, stands in the way towards unity, there is a need to destruct it, namely, to kill it. Through the dismembering of the old man’s body, namely, killing him, annihilating his mundane existence, it is unconsciously hoped to restore it to its basic elements, from which everything is made, so that the elements in the specific combination responsible for the hideous eye, do not exist anymore. This way, as these shared elements achieve unity with the narrator (though in a different way which describing is beyond the scope of this paper). Indeed, in “The Black Cat”, the

depiction, according to which: “The walls with no exception, had fallen in” (p.104), testifies, even subconsciously to the ambition to achieve unification through destruction.

Hence, although unity as the aim of perversity is different from aesthetic unity in Poe’s stories under discussion, still, the unity perversity aspires to, allows the aesthetic unity.

But not only that, death as a solution is also perceived as exciting and uncanny. This further corroborates with Poe’s Dark Gothic fascination with the supernatural. Indeed, death, according to Freud in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) is another source of pleasure and not only life. According to Botting (4347), death, in Freud’s view, is an embodiment of the force of life which undermines the principle of homeostasis as death is aimed at lowering tensions and decreasing excitations of life. Furthermore, according to Botting (3872), in Freud’s view, the death drive suggests what Poe’s horror fiction calls ‘undead’. Namely, the horror fiction aspires, through death, a strange, immortal, and indestructible life which exists after death. This aspiration imbibes excitement of anticipating the uncanny. Indeed, it is well depicted in “The Imp of The Perverse”: “the desire to be well is not only not aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment exists” (p.122). Indeed, Fascination with the supernatural is created by Poe, according to?, by this crossing of borders between life and death. In “The Imp of The Perverse” says: “the most vividly desire it” (p.123). Moreover, in “The Imp of The Perverse”: “yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror” (123). Here, “delight of its horror” suggests the desirability of death as uncanny. In “The Black Cat”: “When I first beheld this apparition [the image of a huge cat] – for I could scarcely regard it as less – my wonder and my terror were extreme” (p.104). As the

protagonist in "The Black Cat" confesses, regarding the image of the huge cat: "Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy" (p.104). Indeed, the depiction involves "fancy", namely, imagination, as it enables opening the door for an elevated and uncanny world. Moreover, here, there is also an expression of self – destruction as a desirable deed in the eyes of the narrator, as the narrator "swoons" following it, alluding to self – destruction as a door for honorable and uncanny world.

This attractiveness of the supernatural as an expression of the protagonists' troubled psyche, is also connected to *

In conclusion

The above discussion clearly shows that Poe's short stories "The Black Cat", "The Tell – Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse" corroborate to clarify perversity as a mental process which is widely discussed in abnormal psychology. This inter – textuality expresses the paper's argument that, facing the narrator's fears of being misunderstood and separated from others, an obsessive desire develops to inflict destruction or death upon the others who arise this distress and himself.

The intertextuality created by these three short stories serves to illuminate the claim in the literature, according to which destruction or death aims at annihilating the gaps created by being misunderstood and separated by allowing unity with the narrator and these ones who caused his fears.

It is important to emphasize that perversity also has to do with the Gothic fiction, as, according to Fisher (75), Poe takes the obscurity which is typical of the tradition of the Gothic fiction and transforms it from a mere architecture of

buildings to an even more complex entity: the human soul. Namely, not a haunted castle anymore, but the protagonist's soul himself is haunted (Fisher, p. 75).

According to the above stories under discussion, it is haunted by perversity.

Indeed, following Scott Peeples (780), although Poe was not the first one to do it, still he dramatized to horrifying degree concepts which Freud will later term and designate as the milestones of the modern psychoanalysis. Perversity is one of the milestones treated by psychoanalysis.

?It seems that the excerpts from "The Imp of Perverse" and "The Black Cat" are more reflective and theoretical, whereas the excerpts from "The Tell – Tale Heart" express its actual expression.?

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