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Poe and James: A Gothic Literary Dialogue

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Introduction

“Well, say to wait for—to have to meet, to face, to see suddenly break out in my life; possibly destroying all further consciousness, possibly annihilating me; possibly, on the other hand, only altering everything, striking at the root of all my world and leaving me to the consequences, however they shape themselves.” (James, “Beast”360)

“I shall perish...I must *perish* in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror.” (Poe, “Fall” 235)

Apprehension followed by all-pervading dread, knowing this dread will annihilate the very core of their being, is a sentiment shared by Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe’s protagonists in “The Beast in the Jungle” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” John Marcher and Roderick Usher are victims of their minds; their hypersensitive consciousness entraps them in a narrow perception of reality, waiting only for the grim events of the future to unfold. The long broken sentences might suggest a hesitant speaker that does not know how to communicate his experience to another. However, in the context of the two stories, those “timid” characters turn out to be very self-conscious speakers that demand the attention of the reader to the extreme. They are at no loss for words; the repetition is an expression of their insistence on viewing (minutely) each shade of their experience, thus giving full validation of their subjective experience, which turns out to be horrific in the end.

Terror in James’s and Poe’s writing is an all-consuming experience that provokes not a pure instinctive response, but an active (some say obsessive) engagement of all the mental faculties. The intellectual and aesthetic interest of Poe and James in the literature of terror, which proves to be similar at intervals, provides a fertile area of research regarding the question of Poe’s influence on James as a writer and a critic. My thesis will explore the complex literary

dialogue between them, viewing the question of Poe's influence in light of James and Poe's mutual interest in supernatural fiction.

Aims and general description

The prime purpose of my thesis is to examine the literary relationship between Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James. In both writers' stories, there is a great emphasis on subjective experience, as demonstrated by the quotes above: in both cases, the haunted consciousness of the two characters is responsible for producing the terror. The supernatural fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James is interested in producing psychological as well as metaphysical terror, offering an innovative take on the conventional supernatural tales that existed in their time, drawing the terror closer to the more intimate realm of the self and the powers of the haunted imagination (Perry and Sederholm 49). The characters become the "authors of their woe" in James's and Poe's tales. Furthermore, the particular awareness of the characters into what causes them the experience of terror shows James and Poe's own metafictional interest in how to produce that particular effect, to which two authors gave detailed critical attention. The account was sometimes made in earnest, sometimes in jest: Poe's essay "'How to Write a Blackwood Article'" satirizes the conventions of horror stories, while James's prefaces to "The Aspern Papers" and "The Altar of the Dead" provide insight into his supernatural works.

Despite the two authors' similar interests and techniques, the connection between them is a subject that few scholars have discussed. Those who did were surprised to find a body of evidence revealing an ambivalent mixture of emotions on James's part. His dialogue with Poe is, to some extent, the complicated relationship between a man and his double, as if Edgar Allan Poe were waiting at bottom of the stairs to reveal his face as the rejected literary precursor of Henry James (Caruso). Although a number of critics have already explored the surprising

connection between Henry James and Edgar Allan Poe, there is plenty of room left for discussion, as John Caruso states in his dissertation from 2014: “Indeed, James’s narrative voice in many of his popular tales featuring haunted writers and uncanny doubles owes much more to Poe than is commonly realized” (23).

I will examine the literary dialogue between the two American masters based on close reading of selected tales of Poe and James. I hope to explore Poe’s role as a possible literary precursor of James by focusing on the Gothic elements of their writing and their respective treatment of two famous Gothic motifs: the haunted house (Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and James’ *The Turn of the Screw*) and the double (Poe’s “William Wilson” and James’ “The Jolly Corner,”), motifs that explore the uncanny regions of identity.

Throughout James’s career, James repeatedly addresses Poe’s work. Despite the fact they belong to very different literary traditions, they possess more similarity than meets the eye. Both authors produced an extensive body of work, ranging from fiction to literary theory, showing themselves to be brilliant practitioners and theoreticians of the literary field. The supernatural provides the opportunity to include Poe and James under the same genre, as their supernatural stories work within the framework of the Gothic tradition. I hope to be able to demonstrate that James’s and Poe’s dialogue was essential to James’s development as an author (among other things) of the supernatural, a subject he became more and more interested in at the late phase of his literary career.

Methodology

My methodology will center around three main points for comparison between the two authors: James’s commentary on Poe, a close comparative reading of their stories, and a consideration of

their dialogue in light of the broader tradition of Gothic writing. I will start my argument with Henry James's literary criticism regarding Edgar Allan Poe, which appears in various places, such as James's essays, reviews and autobiography. The sources reveal James's ambivalent and changing perception of Poe's role in literature. In turn, it might also shed a light on Poe's influence on James's work. A close reading of selected supernatural tales of Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James will support the evidence for Poe's influence, showing how James creates his own stories as a kind of dialectical discourse with Poe. Apart from the critical discourse surrounding Poe and James' literary relationship, I will also use the extensive body of scholarship devoted to Gothic literature, as Gothic motifs in James's and Poe works will be the main focus of my thesis.

Scholarly and Critical Background

James' complex treatment of Edgar Allan Poe

If one could summarize in one word James's literary views on Edgar Allan Poe, the best and (safest) word would be "complex." In 1914, in one of the passages of his autobiography *Notes of a Son & Brother*, James places Poe among the literary American giants of the previous century: Hawthorne, Longfellow and Lowell (James, *Autobiography* 279). While it would seem that James holds the highest degree of respect for Poe's literary stature, that was not always the case. James as a literary critic never dedicated a book, an article, let alone a chapter to Poe's corpus of work as he did for the other three writers, along with a handful of novelists and poets, all celebrated and respected in the Western Canon. Poe seems to stay at the margins of James's critical notice. Yet James cannot help but mentioning Poe's name, in relation to the literary figures to whom he had dedicated a lengthy work of criticism.

James's comments are a strange "heterogeneous admixture" (if we quote from Poe's protagonist—William Wilson) of derogatory remarks mingled with offhand compliments for Poe's genius. The starkest example is James's article on the French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire. The article was published in *Nation* on 2 April 1876, later collected in James's book *French Poets and Novelists* (Gargano). Whenever James tries to determine the reasons for Baudelaire's flaws, he "detects" their source in Edgar Allan Poe, like a doctor who tries to ascertain the source of the patient's malady. Ultimately, James provides one of the harshest and much used critical comments on Poe, saying that "An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection" (James, *Baudelaire* 76). Although James was somewhat averse to Poe's artistic vision, he praised him wholeheartedly as one of America's greatest literary critics, if not the best of them (James, *Hawthorne* 367). This raises an interesting question: why does James appreciate Poe as a critic, and not Poe as a poet/writer? We would expect the two to coincide, but in James's case, there is a clear division between his views of Poe's respective literary vocations.

In the last decade of James's life, we see a positive shift in James's treatment of Poe. If at the beginning of his career, James refrains from addressing Poe's work directly, now he openly addresses it in one of his major novels and the New York prefaces for his collection of "ghost stories." *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* appears as a central metaphor for Prince Amerigo's oncoming marriage to Maggie Verver in the novel *The Golden Bowl*, seeing it as an example to what the American imagination could do. In the preface to "The Altar of the Dead", James compares the effect of "the horrific" in his supernatural stories to the effect of *Narrative of Pym*. The fact that James places himself in a kind of "competition" with Poe (and in

Poe's domain), writing stories of the supernatural, indicates that James began to treat Poe's work with the seriousness it deserves.

Edgar Allan Poe becomes a cherished figure in James' childhood memories: recalling that Poe's works had an immense effect on him as a child, he places Poe on a pedestal, reading and reciting his poems with passion, as if the poems were some sort of a magic spells, possessing a "predominant lustre" (James, *A Small Boy and Others* 36). Perhaps old age had brought Henry James to cherish the "puerile" tastes of his childhood, recollected again in the first part of his autobiography *A Small Boy and Others*.

Critical discourse on Poe's and James's connection—the question of influence

The possibility that Poe was a (rejected) literary precursor of James is a speculation that few critics have offered over the course of the years (Pollin, Pahl, Tintner, Gargano, Kerr, Regen and Caruso). Burton Ralph Pollin, a prominent scholar of Poe, provides the first and serious discussion of James's complex relationship with Poe's literary influence in his article "Poe and Henry James: A Changing Relationship." By examining James's various mentions of Poe, Pollin traces a complicated course of literary influence. Pollin sees James and Poe's "changing relationship" as beginning with James's early love of Poe, continuing through the rejection of Poe's works in his early career as a writer, and leading to a final reconciliation in the shape of James's late novels and tales, in which one can detect various allusions to Poe's works. The most overt evidence for Poe's influence on James, according to Pollin, is James's growing preoccupation with supernatural fiction.

A contrary view to Pollin's argument is found in Denis Pahl's speculation that James suffered from what Harold Bloom's famously called the "anxiety of influence." Pahl ultimately

rejects Pollin's narrative about James's literary relationship with Poe. For him, it is not a "happy tale" of love, rejection and reconciliation as Pollin would have us believe, but rather a persistent ambivalence that was never resolved. What seems to trouble James the most is Poe's lack of moral sensibility, which according to Pahl and James W. Gargano led James to view Poe as a rather self-centered artist who suffered from a limited artistic vision.

While James possessed (one might say) a cruel critical opinion of Poe's works, their views of the art of fiction had much in common. Elsa Nettels examines the similarities between James and Poe's critical views and concludes that James is Poe's successor in terms of American literary criticism. She explains James's ambivalence toward to Poe as coming from the fact that the two wrote very different forms of fiction: Poe was mainly a poet and a short story writer, while James was predominantly a writer of novels.

The existing scholarly discourse offers an excellent basis for exploring the literary connection between Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James. However, few have tried to explore the question of influence through a close reading of the authors' texts, especially in light of the supernatural tales, which position them within the same genre while working in completely different literary fields. There have been attempts to compare the authors' short supernatural stories (Salzberg, Viswanathan, Tintner, Sederholm and Perry). However, with the exception of an article by Adeline Tintner, there has been less emphasis on how the dialectical discourse between them might have affected James's development as a writer of the supernatural. My hope is that my thesis will offer a "holistic" approach: exploring the question of influence, already discussed by prominent scholars, through close reading of the stories, to see how Poe and James negate or complement each other within the boundaries of supernatural fiction.

Poe and James' role in the Gothic tradition

Edgar Allan Poe's place at the forefront of Gothic American Romanticism is unquestionable. Poe's influence on the genre was immense (Bendixen, Botting, Punter). David Punter in his book *The Literature of Terror*, a comprehensive summary of the Gothic tradition, states that "Poe's greatest contribution was in terms not of themes but of structure and tone, in the evolution of a variety of symbolist terror in which he has never been surpassed" (177). In fact, Poe's contribution to the gothic has been so prominent in the scholarship about him that an entire recent collection, *Edgar Allan Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, laments the "narrow" view Poe's scholars have taken, by viewing him first foremost as a writer of the supernatural.

On the other hand, James's contribution to the Gothic tradition is somewhat debatable. In *The Historical Dictionary of the Gothic*, William Hughes presents James as an author whose contribution to the genre was marginal: except for *The Turn of the Screw*, he claims, nothing that James produced was remarkably important (157). However, *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*, published in 2017, one the latest surveys of American Gothic, discusses and mentions James's name quite extensively. James's distinct literary style leads S. L. Varnado to describe him as one masters of the ghost story form "unrivaled for depth and artistic power" (77). Whether, James's writing was essential to the Gothic tradition or not, his supernatural novella *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the most widely discussed stories in academic discourse.

One of my hopes is that the comparison will prove that James's supernatural writing considerably changed and improved by viewing Poe's writing with the seriousness it deserves (Pollin). Arguably, critics find the supernatural fiction of James's later phase better than his earlier ghost stories. There is abundant critical interest in the later tales of James, such as *The Turn of the Screw* and "The Jolly Corner," in comparison to his early tales (Kerr 135). The two stories represent the "peak" in James's career of writing ghost stories, as the early stories lack the

“frightening effect” that is so vital to a successful story of the genre (Auchincloss 94). It will be interesting to see if there is a strong connection between James’s “improvement” of writing in the supernatural fiction and his re-appreciation of Poe, following Pollin’s theory of influence. I will also make occasional reference to James’s early ghost stories, as it will give further emphasis to the claim that his writing in that genre gained its mastery in the later part of his career.

Chapter Outline

Introductory chapter: the chapter will provide the theoretical grounds for James and Poe's literary relationship, beginning with a comprehensive summary of James’s ambivalent treatment of Poe’s work. James was one of the first critical voices that helped to shape the disparaging view that Poe’s writing was deficient in artistic merit. However, when viewing James’s claims closely, we see a more complicated picture. Drawing on James’s reviews, critical writing, prefaces, fiction, and his autobiography, I will consider what proves to be a complex literary dialogue, ranging between critical reserve and a (hesitant) appreciation. Drawing on previous academic research, I will present what James’s reservations with Poe entailed. I will also consider whether there was indeed a significant change in James’s treatment of Poe, as some critics have claimed. Poe’s and James’s surprisingly similar critical views, first noticed by Nettels, will provide another point of comparison.

Chapter Two: The Haunted House: I will explore the theme of the haunted house through Poe’s famous short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” along with James’ equally famous *The Turn of the Screw*. The stories are highly metafictional in the structuring of the plot, playing with the reader/author relationship and ending on a cryptic note. They offer the opportunity of exploring not only James’s and Poe’s “haunted house” but also the “House of Fiction,” a term

James coined in discussing the art of the novel. Poe also uses the interior of the house as a metaphor for his art in his essay “The Philosophy of Furniture” (Walters). By exploring the haunted house formula, I will examine Poe’s and James’s respective artistic concerns in shaping a story of terror. Poe is more up front in presenting the supernatural and using the traditional Gothic tropes, while James is ever subtle, leaving the supernatural to the realm of the possibility.

Chapter Three: The Double: The second pair of stories I analyze share the theme of the double: I will compare “William Wilson,” Poe’s uncanny tale of doubling, with James’s last short story, “The Jolly Corner.” The figure of the double appears in the two stories as a validation of the protagonists’ sense of existence. Yet the meeting with the double unleashes a destructive potential, as it might lead the protagonists to wish for self-obliteration. Through examining the figure of the double, I hope to explore the variations in Poe’s and James’s representation of the metaphysical/supernatural; its aesthetics and its thematic implications.

Conclusion: The final chapter will try to determine Poe’s and James’s position in the Gothic tradition, a place each of the two authors viewed with considerable ambivalence, as the Gothic genre was part of mass culture. Based on close reading and drawing on the copious academic research devoted to Gothic writing, I will examine the difference between James’s and Poe’s representations of the supernatural in their selected stories (the stories I discussed in the previous chapters). What I wish to consider in conclusion is whether Poe’s and James’s different treatment of the supernatural is an extension of eighteenth-century debates over the Gothic, especially the aesthetic argument that existed between Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis over the explicit or subtle representation of the supernatural. If this will prove to be a continuation of the same concerns under different disguises, Poe and James will prove to be another dialectical pair within a broader tradition of debating Gothic aesthetics.

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