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A POE OVERVIEW

The trick, in fully appreciating Poe, is to see how his aesthetic ideas (his theory of art), metaphysical theory, personal obsessions, and desire to cater to one very popular literary genre of the era (gothic sensation fiction, which emphasizes the sensations of a victim in some harrowing situation) all fold together to create the characteristic Poe tale or typical features of many of his tales.

1) The Ideal is desired. Music (non-representational art [mimesis is the technical literary term for art that reflects "reality"—e.g., a description of a Volvo reflects a Volvo out in the parking lot]) provides the best avenue, because although it may conjure up emotions or images, is the most abstract of art forms: it means itself, it doesn't point, as were, to something beyond itself⁰. Problem: how do you create a narrative that doesn't refer to/represent something beyond its own confines (and thus bog us down in thoughts of the mundane world)? How do you avoid the bad art that Poe speaks of in "The Veil of the Soul": "The mere imitation, however accurate, of what is in Nature, entitles no man to the sacred name of 'Artist.' ... We can, at any time, double the true beauty of an actual landscape by half closing our eyes as we look at it. The naked Senses sometimes see too little--but then always they see too much." Here, keep in mind that Poe is implicitly rejecting a Lockean model of mind, in which we passively absorb outside stimuli.

2) What is not of the Ideal realm (all materiality) imprisons us. For Poe (unlike Emerson and Thoreau, both Transcendentalists), the Ideal is not immanent in Nature. Burial/enclosure imagery often symbolizes the aspiring soul entrapped in materiality/nature (in the broadest sense, not trees and bears).

3) #2 links psychologically, quite likely, to Poe's sense of being suffocated by his desperate, impoverished lifestyle (he was one of the first U.S. writers to make a living--barely, if that--by pen alone; this often entailed endless hours being the editor of various journals) and, probably, to his mother/cousin-wife dying. Also, he held in his faux-father, Allen, in contempt for his philistine crassness.

Psychologists who have studied the mourning process claim that images of engulfment typically represent a child-mourner's frustrated desire to regain attachment/union with the dead mother (note how images of engulfment/abyss/eternity, etc., in "Manuscript" simultaneously strike panic/fear and desire in the narrator--fear of death but also longing for pre-natal "oneness" with the maternal, as it were). Those who provide psychoanalytical interpretations of Poe also claim that images of decay, inanimate substances that seem to be animate, resurrections from the grave, etc., symbolize the child's inability to understand rationally that the dead mother is really gone.

The problem with such interpretive approaches or with interpretations that read the tales as projections of inward psychological conflict--e.g. Eye/Old Man (= symbolic projection of Superego, which itself is an introjection of exterior authority) must be killed violently and with manic glee by Son (Id impulsivity, resenting Superego) because Son enters some tabooed

space (of maternity/femininity, via eye-cat-wife link in "Black Cat")--is that they are difficult to relate to. If we accept that Poe's tales are dream-like as they divulge the strange, jumbled contents of the unconscious, we must either be willing to fuse together stories and see how images get associated (eye-cat-wife) OR be sensitive to the potentially disturbing contents of our own minds: the point of the "Cask of M" is to take pleasure in Montresor's sadistic glee as he walls up F.! The point of "A Tell-Tale Heart" is the Oedipal pleasure of slaying the Father who forbids tabooed delights, etc.

We should also consider the trauma of young Poe seeing his (by all accounts, quite beautiful) mother die and revive on the stage as she played Shakespearean heroines. Or the trauma of seeing his young (3-D, as it were) wife die in one room, while he writes (in 2 D) in another: writing/texts and bodies in Poe get interchanged, transposed, and converted all the time. Of the reason Poe loved cryptograms is that "buried" meaning is encrypted within the surface gibberish of the code. He was, incidentally, a master of constructing cryptograms, and such is a theme of some of his stories.

Two other examples of the latter: turn to the pages with strange markings in "Narrative of AGP": the narrator explores these massive, cavernous ravines; but from a bird's eye perspective, they look like arcane, indecipherable writing. If you read "Pit and Pendulum" the odd prison room of the prisoner has peculiar hieroglyphic writing on its walls. In Poe, paranoia/desire always hovers around secretive writing, buried secrets, buried vaults, crypts, cryptographic puns. That's why I emphasized (I'm sure too often!) the box-within-a-box-within-a-box/story-within-a-story-within-a-story structure of "Oval Portrait."

Keep in mind that this is an era in which for various reasons, "American Romantic" writers are especially sensitive to what it means to make meaningful "marks": 1) fascination with Egyptian hieroglyphs decoded in the Rosetta Stone, 2) a recognition that sublime sentiments cannot quite be captured in words, 3) anxiety (in an entrepreneurial culture, in which it is difficult to make writing pay) about indulging the creative habit. 4) a desire to make "marks" a tease to sublime thought (if "Volvo" transparently and directly pointed to a Volvo-concept in your mind or a Volvo in the parking lot, the word "Volvo" would unproblematically represent what it represents; by creating an aura of blockage around "Volvo," paradoxically, in terms of representation, we are conducted to the Ideal (#1 above). The French loved Poe's poetry, in part, because he seemed to be pronouncing a theory of art sake for art's sake: art does "do" or "represent" or "mean" anything (sometimes we call this theory "aestheticism"; Oscar Wilde, loosely, had the same theory towards the end of the nineteenth-century in Britain).

For Poe, exploring Woman/Maternity/the Grave/Secretive, revelatory Knowledge/Interiority is obsessively necessary and ultimately futile or open-ended. When you read the stories "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" and "The Purloined Letter" ponder all of this!

4) How do you get to work through the psychological traumas/problems of #3 and express the metaphysical notion of #2? You come up with another metaphysical idea, which Poe talks about in his long hoaxy-scientific treatise Eureka--the universe is in the process of dematerializing, dissolving into finer and finer particles, eventually so fine as to be non-corporeal. Images of death/decay/entering gloomy gothic spaces in Poe simultaneously and paradoxically represent a desired movement towards the Ideal (dissolution of materiality/feminine--maternal engulfing space) and the horror of losing loved ones/being entrapped. The conflict between desire (for what is beyond materiality)/fear (about material decay) leads to the typical hysterical tone of many of his narrators. The ending of Poe stories typically speed up, with an at once

manic and reluctant rush to the conclusion, in which meaning will at once be fulfilled and denied. Note this, particularly, in "Usher."

5) Poe also uses gothic imagery because (as a very professional editor) he was immersed in the magazine culture of his day, and well-knew how to please popular taste. Today, we just read the classics—Melville, Hawthorne, etc.; but in fact there were all sorts of popular authors in this period writing historical-religious "Sword and Sandal" romances about gladiators and swooning princesses, crime stories, and adventure stories. (A few years ago, a scholar made his scholarly name by writing a book called "Beneath the American Renaissance," which recaptures all these now-unread but then popular works.)

6) You also can approach the Ideal by turning your attention away from the mundane world, by retreating inward: thus all the hypersensitive, introspective artist types in Poe's fiction (of course, such may also lead to dementia). Again, make the comparison and why I've made the Emerson eyeball passage so crucial: for Emerson transcendental euphoria occurs by taking a sojourn in Nature although Nature is transcended, but for Poe, ultimately Nature (trees, bears, houses, your body, whatever) must be travelled through as a prison to be escaped from.

7) What sort of imagery, etc., will best serve non-moral or non-content, non-representational art (#1), provide the desired intensity of sensation/consciousness, and serve Poe's psychological and metaphysical agenda? How keep us interested or in a heightened state of consciousness/suspense, without producing meaning (which is not to say that there aren't themes in Poe's stories--I'm emphasizing an aspect of/one way of interpreting Poe's stories)?

--images of enclosure or rooms sealed from the wider (mundane) world

--rather than relationships between psychologically distinct characters (which would lead to ethical conflict, etc.), lots of doubles (i.e., aspects of the protagonist)

--narratives with an enigma/puzzle structure (either we don't get the answer or the interest is in the act of solving the puzzle, not the solution itself)

--many puns and cryptograms (both carry "buried" messages, but significance is in the structure of the pun, not meaning per se)

--self-reflexive references to the process of reading/writing/art (e.g., "The Oval Portrait" is a story about a story about an artist whose wife decays/fades so that his art will partake of the Ideal)

--allusions to all sorts of esoteric knowledge (so you don't really know what is being referred to)

--vague, gloomy atmosphere or hypnotic/narcotic prose (alliteration, musicality)

--contradictory images

--endings open-ended, cataclysmic, or exceedingly abrupt (you expect more, but don't get it)

--general feeling of paranoia (the fearful anticipation of some overwhelming horror/revelation is more significant than the actual horror or revelation)

8) Keep in mind that a character in a Poe story may be a projection of the narrator's (or Poe's)

obsessions/mentality or a projection of another character's obsessions/mentality (burying his sister = Usher's attempt to repress his desire for her?)

KEEP IN MIND WHEN YOU ARE READING POE

--stories mostly are fun/shocking suspense/macabre stories

--but stories also dream-like magnification/intensification, with symbolic characters/objects

--irrational/repeated obsessions (sadistic violence against orifices: wife/cat and old man's eye) requires psychological "decoding"

--"decoding" valid if makes sense of repeated patterns: takes rereading of many tales or intuition of your own unconscious processes

--"decoding" fun but speculative, and you can't feel the conflict (self-tormenting theme if we see Montresor/Fortunato as two sides of Poe)

--Tell-Tale: orifice=sexual desire (Poe sneaking into Virginia's room) + father-figure/surveillance that you want to murder because checks desire. The eye collapses together (this is what happens in dreams) both the tabooed object and punishment for peeping on/desiring the tabooed object.

GROUPING OF TALES: all of Poe's stories are characteristically Poe-like, sharing features reviewed above. For convenience, though, they may be grouped as follows (not all read for this class):

--Aesthetic theory of supernal/non-representational art: excerpts handed out: Marginalia, etc.

--Captivity in material world: Pit and the Pendulum, Manuscript Found in a Bottle

--Exploratory Journeys: Manuscript Found in a Bottle, Narrative of Authur Gordon Pym

--Confession/irrational motives (psychoanalytical): Cask of Amontillado, The Tell Tale Heart, Black Cat

--Detection/puzzle-solving: The Gold-bug, Murders in the Rue Morgue, Purloined Letter

--Beautiful women dematerializing: Ligeia, Fall of the House of Usher, Oval Portrait