

EVIL AS PERVERSE IN LITERATURE

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Abstract: The paper draws an analysis of evil as a major theme with Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky. The premise that evil is a common innate "emotion" found within us all relies on Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse". The evil or the perverse would include jealousy, revenge, pride, ambition, greed and psychological manipulation. The issue is how we manage to keep this perverseness in check through our good side, i.e. through conscience or remorse.

Keywords: good and evil, perverse, spiritual breakdown, psychological manipulation, conscience

For thousands of years, humankind has struggled to understand and define the phenomenon of evil and to discover the reason for its existence. The omnipresence of evil is evidenced by the ancient Greek philosophy, the Hebrew Bible, the Christian New Testament, notable evil figures throughout history and a plethora of literature devoted to the subject. Yet, while the definition and purpose of evil have remained indefinable, humankind has always been able to recognise it immediately. What makes defining evil difficult are the circumstances under which individual acts should be considered evil (Cf. *WikiAnswers*). For the sake of simplification, I will consider evil as synonymous with perverse, which belongs to the bad side of man, while its antonym is morality, conscience, remorse, which belong to the good side of man.

Edgar Allan Poe in "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) explains why evil exists and flourishes in man. In the story, "a condemned murderer explains his confession, which followed years of safe concealment, in terms of a perverse impulse, and states that perversity is an unrecognised major motive for men's actions." (*Oxford Companion to American Literature* 314) Obsessed with the macabre, with man's darker side, Poe destroyed himself through drinking and drugs. He put the blame on the perverse (evil) as an inherent trait in man, a drive within us to do harm and evil that we, as human beings, have little control or no control to seize or retain. All we can do is to acknowledge the reality of the evil that exists around us and be able to keep it in check to a certain extent. We all commit acts of evil. However, it is up to us to how far we let the perverseness take over our rational thought. This is what defines us as human beings.

In Poe's story "The Tell Tale Heart", the evil is the driving force of obsession which leads us to do unthinkable deeds that we feel and think we are incapable of doing. A victim of a nervous disease is overcome by homicidal mania and murders an innocent old man in whose home he lives. The mobile of the crime was his obsession with an unreasonable thought about his master's "evil eye". The story is a very interesting character study on how an obsessive

thought can take complete control over our rational thought processes. The narrator states that he holds no hatred for his master; in fact, he tells us that he loved the old man. He confuses the ticking of the old man's watch with an excited heartbeat, and although he dismembers the body, he neglects to remove the watch when he buries the pieces beneath the floor. The old man's dying shriek has been overheard, and three police officers come to investigate. They discover nothing, and the murderer claims that the old man is absent in the country, but when they remain to question him, he hears a loud rhythmic sound that he believes to be the beating of the buried heart. This so distracts his diseased mind that he suspects the officers to know the truth and are merely trying his patience, and in an insane fit, he confesses his crime.

There are two evils in the story: first, the murder of the old man, and second the driving force of obsession that ironically enough cannot be controlled. Out of the two, the latter evil is greater: this lack of control in an individual to quell that perverseness ends only when perverseness is satisfied and the character has apparently regained control of his rational thought. But that is true only till he hears the constant, loud beating of the old man's heart and confesses his crime.

Another interesting study of character and the fight between good and evil is found in Poe's tale entitled "William Wilson". Professor Lauvriar wrote in 1904 that "William Wilson" was an autobiography of Poe's life. However, according to Robertson, "William Wilson" is not based on Poe's personal experiences, despite being psychoanalytical in character. There are two characters with identical names, but with different personalities: one embodying the good, while the other the evil. The first, also the narrator, is a controlling, manipulating, overbearing individual. He finds it necessary to constantly harass, embarrass and over-power his peers through psychological manipulation. He takes great pleasure in instilling fear into his peers and is constantly seeking to maintain and impose his will upon others. He also drinks to excess, gambles, cheats, and commits acts of adultery.

Poe's second William Wilson is a mirror image of the narrator. He is said to be of the same height, weight, and complexion. The second William Wilson represents the good side of man. The narrator cannot provoke or manipulate him; on the contrary, the narrator is exposed by the good William Wilson for what he is, the evil that exists within us all. No explanation is offered to us as to the circumstances under which the narrator became evil. The only important issue is that the narrator stands for the evil, the perverse in us all. Poe tells us that we all must have our good side to keep this perverseness in check. This can be achieved through morality, i.e. through conscience, remorse, by seeking the moral issues that confront the character who has committed the evil act. The presence of a conscience gives us our humanity and for most people it keeps their potential to maintain evil in check. Conscience is our hope, the path to salvation. Confession is a desperate attempt to reintegrate one's conscience with one's actions. It is a quest for forgiveness from one's fellow human beings but ultimately from God.

Evil is not an act that has a justification of its own (e.g. murder as self-defence); evil is the purposeful manipulation (psychological or physical) of another human being to seek revenge, power or control over that human being. It takes different aspects, so we can speak about natural evils such as obsession, jealousy, revenge, pride, greed, ambition, and psychological manipulation.

Poe's theory of perverseness is reinforced in the works of Melville, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky.

Herman Melville's novella "Billy Budd" is an interesting study in good versus evil, as well as the consequences of evil's triumph over good. There are three main characters: Billy Budd, who represents the essence of goodness, Claggart, the Sergeant in Arms, who represents evil, and Captain Vere, who may be said to embody both good and evil. Billy Budd is the typical '*handsome sailor*' of 18th century balladry, and "because of his innocence and beauty [he] is hated by Claggart, a dark, demon-haunted petty officer. In his simplicity, Billy cannot understand why Claggart should hate him, why evil should desire to destroy good. Claggart concocts a fantastic story of mutiny, supposedly plotted by Billy, whom he accuses to the captain. Billy, unable to speak, in his only act of rebellion strikes Claggart a fatal blow. Captain Vere, who sympathises with Billy and recognises his essential innocence, is nevertheless forced to condemn him, and though Billy is hanged he lives on as a legend among sailors." (*Oxford Companion to American Literature* 68)

Claggart's psychological abuse of Billy Budd begins almost immediately. The reader does not really know why Claggart has a personal vendetta against Billy Budd. Billy Budd is a handsome sailor who does what he is told and is liked by all. One can only speculate that perhaps Claggart is jealous or envious of Billy Budd. Alternatively, Claggart may have what Poe would call "the perverse". Claggart may very well be an individual that was born or has an innate drive to commit acts of evil against others. It is a drive that he cannot control, nor does he want to. He takes pleasure in committing these psychological acts of evil, which in the end will cost him his life. Billy Budd, after being accused by Claggart of planning a mutiny, strikes out at him and accidentally kills him. Of course, murder is an act of evil, but perhaps because of the circumstances, we can forgive Billy Budd. As Wilson states: "*like Rappaccini's garden, the world of Billy Budd is fearfully complex: an evil man has been deservedly killed; an innocent has committed the murder and Captain Vere takes upon himself the tragic burden of condemning Billy Budd to death*". Can we find Captain Vere guilty of evil acts? By condemning Billy Budd to death, he was supporting a moral code of the sea. History dictated to him that one who murders a superior officer must be put to death. The reader could feel Captain Vere's pain in his decision. However, after all things have been considered, the reader has only to admit Vere's decision as being justified.

The reader should also question the moral and ethical codes of organised institutions such as the military ones. Were they right, or were they breeding a form of evil among honest men? Perhaps Herman Melville was addressing these very issues in his novella. Unfortunately, as history has taught us, these codes still exist.

The 'evil' found in many of Nathaniel Hawthorne's works echoed Herman Melville's message of injustice and the evil found within all human beings. "Ethan Brand" is a short story in which the protagonist's '*unpardonable sin*' is the acquisition of knowledge. Ethan's thirst for knowledge causes a deep split between his mind and the heart for it is precisely in his own heart where Ethan finds the Unpardonable Sin; he has lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity: "*He was no longer a brother-man...he was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment, and ... converting man and woman to be his puppets, and pulling the wires that moved them to such degrees of crime as were demanded for his study.*" (Hawthorne: 436). Knowledge was so powerful that it rivalled humankind and

God himself. As Fairbanks states, it is not so much the acquisition of knowledge that is evil; it is the protagonist's inability to balance knowledge with morality. Hawthorne's Ethan Brand becomes a "fiend" because he loses his morality in his quest for knowledge. Moreover, not only did he lose his morality to find knowledge, but he also used, abused and destroyed the soul of a young girl. Making Esther the subject of a psychological experiment, he destroys her soul in the process. Annihilating souls is undoubtedly anti-God; it is very much Satan-like.

In his book *Facing Evil*, John Kekes states: "A human being causing undeserved harm by choice is necessary and sufficient for moral evil ..." (47). Hawthorne's rightly asserts that the moment Ethan's moral nature ceases to "keep pace with the improvement of his mind he becomes a fiend" (436). The disintegration of heart and mind ultimately leads to spiritual collapse and evil; in Ethan's case, the evil he has caused turns back upon himself; disintegration leads to his decision to commit suicide. There is nothing left for him to attain. He has reached his goal and completed his task. He realised that he had found 'The Unpardonable Sin' and sacrificed himself into the fire for eternity.

Possibly, one of the greatest works that reinforces Edgar Allan Poe's theory of perverseness is Feodore Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In this novel the reader can travel inside the mind of Dostoyevsky's protagonist and experience with him the stages of his evil mind. Thus, the reader is led step by step into a horrible act of evil (murder) and is left to ponder the motivation for this act of evil, the consequences for this act of evil; similarly, at the end of the novel, the reader is to judge the protagonist according to his perception of redemption and remorse.

Rodon Raskolnikov is an example of another character who experiences a spiritual breakdown which results in the commission of evil. The poverty and despair that exist in the protagonist's world, his misfortunes and lack of work make him bitter and resentful. He suffers from depression and at times cannot leave his room, or rise from his bed. Raskolnikov feels exploited and feels the need to blame someone for his poverty and despair. Poverty and despair can motivate someone to commit a crime. However, there is something else, a 'perverseness' present within Raskolnikov that makes him feel superior to those around him. His tragedy lies in the fact that he stops believing in God, murdering for an ideal. Without God, he attempts to become God-like. He assumes that "great men, with the sole object of contributing to the future good of mankind, have the right to kill a specimen of the lowest sort of human creature, who is only a source of evil to others" (Berdyayev: 582). Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, Raskolnikov contemplates the idea of murdering Alena Ivanova, the pawnbroker, as a proper thing to do for the sake of society. He feels that this woman exploits not only himself but others, as well. To Raskolnikov, this woman is nothing but a parasite and in his mind he knows that she deserves to die. Not only does he commit the murder but he also ponders the idea for weeks before he commits the act. In one of his attempts to validate the murder, Raskolnikov states: "I longed to kill without casuistry, to kill for my own benefit ... I needed to find out then, and find out as soon as possible, whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man, whether I was capable of stepping over the barriers or not. (Dostoyevsky: 354).

The reader has two thought processes to define. First, he must understand the evil that exists within any individual who considers himself better than another human being because of education or social status. Secondly, the reader has to see the evil existing in an individual

who would take another human life just to see what it was like. Raskolnikov murders another human being just to satisfy his curiosity about death. That is, he ‘needs’ to carry out this murder to satisfy that ‘perverseness’ within himself.

It is not enough that Raskolnikov commits the evil act of murder; then, he commits another evil act by burdening an innocent person with his guilt and shame.

Raskolnikov’s evil is punished by his isolation from the rest of humanity. The author has his protagonist start to search his soul and begin to feel remorse for his crimes. He withdraws into himself, spending hours on end ruminating about the cause of the murder and its consequences. He had no reason other than what could be called ‘sick’ curiosity. According to Johnson, Dostoyevsky’s epilogue makes possible the rebirth of the protagonist. The reader sees a transformation, a religious experience that takes place within Raskolnikov. He realises he has been wrong. His shame stems not from the atrocity he committed but his perception that he is, after all, only “*a base and incompetent human*” (Dostoyevsky: 438). He knows for the first time in his life what it is like to feel human. He finds faith not only in God but also in his friend Sonya. Raskolnikov becomes a new human being with a new, positive outlook on life.

Raskolnikov, the new person is fortunate now because he has an external conscience in the character of Sonya, the epitome of goodness and virtue, who is ultimately his salvation. Sonya knows that God makes all things possible and through God, she helps Raskolnikov return from spiritual decay to spiritual life. This is the beginning of his slow ascent back towards morality.

At this stage, the reader might rightly wonder whether Raskolnikov could be exonerated. Can he be looked at as a new person, with a new heart and soul? He has committed a crime cold-blooded, a crime that has no justification whatsoever. In this sense, his evil act is unpardonable and unforgivable.

This kind of tragedies illustrates our vulnerability to evil. “*the unspeakable pain ... and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness ... and the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent...*” (Kekes: 4-5). Tragic heroes are “*larger than life, their sufferings are extraordinary, their situations are peculiar and extreme*” (Kekes: 40). However, to paraphrase Kekes (182) their tragedy is not inherent to the world; they conspire to commit it.

Sometimes, the heroes of tragedies end up in the most destructive encounters because of the conflict between moral imperatives (Kekes: 32). William Shakespeare’s classic plays “Othello” and “Macbeth” depict natural evils found in human beings. These evils would include jealousy, revenge, greed and psychological manipulation. Because of these human evils in both “Othello” and “Macbeth”, murder and deceit have been committed.

Othello is a good and gallant Moor in the service of the Venetian State. From the very beginning of the play, the reader perceives the dark-skinned Moor as having a social stigma or prejudice against him; he is treated differently by others in the play. Othello and the Venetian Desdemona elope only to have their marriage and lives destroyed within two days.

Throughout the play, we see the struggle between the forces of good and evil; once again evil triumphs. Othello is portrayed as inherently good while Othello’s standard-bearer Iago is inherently evil. Iago, out of jealousy and hate (he has been refused promotion), does his best to convince Othello that his wife Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. Othello, to whom ‘*honesty*’ equals ‘*morality*’, is easily deceived by Iago. In his evil act, Iago has an

accomplice in Roderigo. Roderigo is perceived as being manipulated by Iago, and we can only feel pity for him. His faith in Iago costs him his life. They plan to kill Cassio. The plot is foiled, and Iago murders Roderigo for fear Othello might be informed about the plot.

On behalf of the same sense of 'honour', Othello kills his innocent wife. Othello finds out the truth after he has committed the evil (murder), an evil brought about by jealousy and betrayal. Unlike Raskolnikov, who chooses confession, Othello commits suicide as a self-punishment for the evil deed.

Both Othello and Iago are evil and commit evil deeds. However, it is only Iago who has full control over the others' actions. He is the character who lacks conscience or human feelings. He does not care at all whether through his acts somebody will get hurt emotionally or physically.

Iago's, as well as Ethan Brand's and Raskolnikov's perverseness and the lack of control over it lead them into consciously seeking out and practising evil deeds. Unlike them, Othello experiences evil as an outside force urging along the evil within his own soul. Regardless of the type of encounter with evil, two things are apparent. First, all the characters discussed so far have ended up either alone or dead, except for Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov is saved because he has Sonya who loves him and brings spirituality back into his empty life. We never know for sure whether Raskolnikov completely returns to God, but the path to salvation has been reopened. Secondly, the locus of evil is irrelevant in determining whether evildoers feel remorse for their deeds. What makes humans feel guilty is a feeling of unworthiness deep in our souls. It is a fundamental experience which "*indicates the real situation of man before God, whether man knows it or not*" (Ricoeur: 7).

Guilt drives humans to regain their feelings of worthiness through the act of confession.

Evil is the result of the split with God. Confession allows our conscience to speak and have connections re-established with faith and God; the wicked would never feel guilt nor be motivated to confess.

Shakespeare's "Macbeth" is a play that involves the perverseness of ambition, jealousy and pride. The main characters are the evil witches of prophecy, Macbeth, and his over ambitious wife Lady Macbeth. Throughout the play, there is a great tension between the forces of good and evil (natural and unnatural) in their attempt to take hold of man's soul.

In the opening scene, Macbeth is presented as an honourable hero returning from a victorious battle to defend the country. He is both strong-willed and weak-willed. Although clearly ambitious, when he is predicted by the witches to be the future king, he is willing to wait for the throne, being a man of principle and with conscience.

Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, ambitious for her husband, consciously and deliberately invokes the powers of evil to aid her in her plans to see Macbeth crowned. Learning about his wife's plan to kill king Duncan, he fights against his conscience, still refusing to kill for the throne. He gives in and approves of killing only when his wife questions his manhood. Not only does he kill Duncan, but he kills him while he is a house guest in his home; to make the act even more abominable, he kills him while he sleeps.

In choosing evil over good, both characters get punished. Lady Macbeth who is so guilt ridden begins walking in her sleep and slowly begins to get mad. Macbeth is killed by General Macduff who has sworn revenge on him.

It is interesting to note the differences between the characters in the two Shakespearean plays. Iago has no conscience or remorse for his evil deeds. However, although Macbeth and Lady Macbeth commit murder, they do feel remorse and guilt for their crimes. In both plays, the reader has to ponder over the motivation of evil and its consequences.

In conclusion, the concept of evil as inherent and flourishing in man has been frequently dealt with by writers in their works not only for its social dimension (the fact that man lives in society) but also because they considered the social consequences of evil as well as its psychological effects. Although elusive and difficult to define, it has been ascribed many meanings; despite that, the cognitive picture our mind reveals to us when we speak about evil is a physical evil (present in everyday life such as rape, murder, robbery). However, in great works of literature, evil cannot be defined in such tangible terms. Although the reader may well be witness to an act of physical violence, he or she must delve deeper into that work and seek the moral issues (justifications if any) that confront the character who has committed the evil act.

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