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English 1302

Research Paper

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*A Modest Look at Two Literary Geniuses: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe*

How can one speak confidently and justly of the pioneer's of poetry, prose, and literary éclat without mentioning the names of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne? **Mr.** Hawthorne and **Mr.** Poe are writers who not only carved out massive dales of literary intellectualism, but are also writers who've ascended and transcended beyond the highest mountains of literature. Look deep and at the heart of the very foundation and essence of literature, and you shall find the phantasms of Poe and Hawthorne; peruse beyond the foundation and upon the pinnacle of literature and, again, you shall find the phantasms of Poe and Hawthorne. Moreover, what is more interesting still, is the fact that these two iconic writers were contemporaries. Poe, a stark and (sometimes) unforgiving literary critic of his time, is remembered for his comity and praise of Hawthorne and his work *Twice-told Tales*. Poe pronounced Hawthorne "one of the few men of disputable genius to whom our country has yet given birth" (Thompson 167). Although they were contemporaries, they differed in their deeper, allegorical explorations and intentions in writing. Specifically, Poe was more interested in developing esoteric, opaque explorations of the squalidness, sordidness of the human psyche and id, while Hawthorne was more interested in decocting the concept of sin. Nonetheless, the two adamantly used death, despair, mysteriousness, and murder as a consistent means to express their underlying, allegorical, metaphysical arguments. Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" are prototypical examples of their explorations.

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Furthermore, these two tales are similar in that they both utilize murder as a means to an end—the end being their own specific overarching theme. In E.A. Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” there is a utilization of murder as a utility for a broader motive of the exploration of man’s id; and in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” there is a utilization of murder as a utility for the greater exploration of the potentiality of ethical implications of unwarranted scientific exploration.

“In the essay ‘The Philosophy of Composition,’ written in the same year as ‘The Cask of Amontillado,’ Poe demonstrates that there are no details in his works that appear due to accident or intuition, and that his work proceeds ‘to its completion with precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem’ (Baraban 47). Poe’s essay “The Philosophy of Composition” is best understood as an argumentative piece that pertains to the assiduousness in the architecture-ship of a literary masterpiece. In short, according to Poe, an auspicious literary piece is best characterized by the author’s adherence to a few imperative compositional dogmas: shortness in length, method (methodical writing as opposed to artistic intuition), and the concept coined by Poe as “unity of effect.” Poe’s “unity of effect” is best understood as Poe’s conviction that a work of fiction is best written once the author decides on the intended ending to a piece—in terms of the intended emotional response. In keeping to this compositional philosophy, Poe constructed “The Cask of Amontillado.” Although the tale is one of murder, it is by no means the epitome of the tale. “The Cask of Amontillado’ is a mystery, for at its heart lies an intriguing question: ‘Why did he [Montresor] do it?’ This question is different from the ‘Who’s done it?’ of a classical mystery, as the latter presents crime as a logical puzzle solved by a detective thanks to his intellect (Baraban 48). Poe’s adroit writing is done with the full intention of guiding the reader to do some investigative work; what kind of person or, better yet, psychotic mind could do

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such a crime and only defend themselves in arguments clouded in vagueness? “Thompson uses the fact that Montresor's narration is actually a confession made on his deathbed to support the argument about Montresor's troubled conscience” (Baraban 48). In contrast to this interpretation is the hypothesis that “Montresor feels satisfaction about his monstrous deed even after fifty years” (Baraban 49). This latter hypothesis regarding Montresor's sadistic mindset destroys any hope in Montresor's empathic, remorseful feelings for Fortunato and, in doing so, sways towards the psychotic side of the spectrum of sanity and insanity. “Montresor is perfectly calm and rational in his account. He never expresses pity for his enemy or feels remorse for what he did” (Baraban 49). Further, according to Baraban, Montresor perceives his murder as a successful act of vengeance and punishment rather than crime. “Poe's intriguing silence about the nature of the insult that made Montresor murder Fortunato has given rise to explanations of Montresor's deed through insanity” (Baraban 50). In contrast to this viewpoint, Joseph J. Moldenhauer argues “While on the conscious level Montresor is untouched by sympathy for his entombed companion, his malaise betrays at least a bodily ‘kinship’ with Fortunato and suggests a psychological identification as well” (Mouldenhaur 293). Moldenhauer constructs premises that seemingly support a conclusion that Montresor subconsciously perceives Fortunato as a kind of part of himself; a kind of one of one's self. This extremely peculiar empathy can be argued to be a kind of culmination of Montresor's insanity; believing that Fortunato belongs to him. “The identity of Fortunato has become internalized in Montresor, forming no small part of his ‘buried’ store of values” (Mouldenhaur 293). Another interesting interpretation for Montresor's motive for murder lies within his obligation to his family's motto: “*Nemo me impune lacessit*” (“No one insults me with impunity”)...