

The Poe-etic Villain as Internal Prison Space

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The Gothic genre is considered to have begun in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ontranto*. Since then, the genre has developed in many ways, while at the same time maintaining key motifs. Of interest, are the ways in which certain elements amalgamate while maintaining the general dynamics of those elements. One such example of this lies in the overlap between the villain-hero—or protagonist—and the locations of gothic spaces in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1949). James M. Keech (1974) offers a general list of traditional motivations in the Gothic novel from which my argument departs from. He writes, "[...] the Gothic novel [...] deals not with gambling, thievery, or simple murder, but with matricide, rape, incest, [...] murders of innocent children and virginal brides [...] blasphemy, infectious spiritual pollution and damnation (Keech 1974; 133). In this way, Gothic literature often deals with severe affronts to the shared moral fabric.

However, as Darlene H. Unrue (1995) argues, Poe's sense of the Gothic doesn't follow strict genre formalisms. She writes,

Poe...is never didactic, and the terror he generates is never gratuitous. He uses Gothic machinery in his tales to symbolize states of mind in characters tormented by intimations of death, insanity, and other forms of annihilation and chaos that lead to no rational reconciliation. Moreover, Poe viewed most examples of literary Gothicism as vulgar and defended himself against such an association. (Unrue 1995; 114)

In other words, while avoiding the more vulgar elements of the Gothic genre, Poe turns the symbolism of such grotesqueries inward. This is the general shift in Poe's Gothicism, namely, that the elements of the Gothic are not outward manifestations but inward mental materializations—seeking a certain verisimilitude rather than the shock of sheer vulgarity. Instead of overt assaults on morality and decency, Poe strikes at the heart of deeper primordial concerns. What emerges through Poe is a protagonist who serves as their own antagonist, the effects of which manifest a very real and torturous prison space that only exists in the mind and becomes increasingly impossible to escape from.

The following works are analyzed under the framework of this new synthesized Poe-etic definition: *the Poe-etic Villain-Hero/ Poe-etic Gothic Space: A Gothic protagonist who mentally manifests his or her own prison, from which there is no autonomous capability for escape. This villain-hero often performs tasteless acts, embodies the duality of good and evil, is intelligent, emotional, cynical and lonely, and a hopeless romantic.* Applying this definition to “William Wilson”, “The Pit and the Pendulum”, “Annabel Lee”, and “The Raven” will reveal nuances in the synthesized Gothic trope of the Poe-etic villain-hero as a simultaneous self-imposing prison space.

In Poe's works of fiction and poetry, there is a convergence of the villain-hero and the Gothic space, which manifests self-reflexively into the same proverbial prison, showing the protagonist simultaneously as their own prisoner and prison space. Jacqueline Bradley, in *Character Doubles and Barrier Imagery in Poe's Work* (2008), makes the point, “[w]hile critics have focused on the double as various aspects of the psyche, the connection between the character double and the pattern of barrier has remained unexplored” (Bradley 2008; 55). She makes the point in relation to doppelgangers and the phallic nature of Gothic

spaces in Poe's works, but the point still stands in this analysis: there is a complex network linking the barriers of the Gothic space, the duality of the doppelganger, and the internal shift to the mind. While this essay is not directly concerned with doppelgangers, it should be understood that the villain-hero is, fundamentally, its own doppelganger, as will be shown in the analysis that follows. Here I intend to explore the so-called "[...] pattern of barrier [...]" (Bradley 2008, 55) to characterize one element of Gothic spaces as abstract fictions that are very real materializations in the lives of the protagonists that imagine them.

Paul Quinnell (ND) locates three stock variants of the villain-hero: the Satanic, who embodies evil and is characteristic of one who justifies acts of breaking Biblical laws and morals; the Promethean, who embodies the ethical duality of the Satanic hero interacting with his or her society, and does good "[...]by performing an overreaching or rebellious act"; and the Byronic, which Quinnell writes, is "[a]ristocratic, suave, moody, handsome, solitary, secretive, brilliant, cynical, sexually intriguing, and nursing a secret wound" (Quinnell ND; 37-38). While Poe's villain-heroes seem to embody a bit of all three protagonist types, they are not so much perpetuated by a predisposition of character (though they are to some degree). Rather, I'd like to draw attention to Quinnell's language, which suggests that the protagonist types emerge out of their actions with the world instead of possessing inherent character traits. For example, the Satanic "justifies" (Quinnell ND; 37) evil acts, implying that their value are not self-evident to the Satanic in the first place. The Promethean is simultaneously ambitious and subversive to the dominant culture and does "good" (Quinnell ND; 37)—illustrating the subjectivity of value judgments. Lastly, the Byronic reminds us that these personality traits require others with which to juxtapose one's self with. This is to suggest that Gothic protagonists are not born villain-heroes, necessarily, but drive themselves into villainy against themselves by behaving with, or in response to

others and their actions. In this ongoing analysis, narrators and speakers will be understood as unfortunate people, who, due to circumstance, are their own greatest villain.

Poe's villain-hero demonstrates that the protagonist is not situated solely in a physical location, but more importantly located in the labyrinthine catacombs of the mind. This is where the villain-hero and Gothic space converge: the abstract walls of the villain-hero's mind prevent escape and ensure madness, despite the ironically dramatic freedom of the villain-hero's physical reality. To illustrate the abstract dynamics of the villain-hero's internal Gothic space, Elizabeth Thomas' (ND) more formal definitions of Gothic space serves to measure out its intangible dimensions: claustrophobia, and entrapment or imprisonment. On claustrophobia, she writes, "[a]n abnormal dread of being confined in a close or narrow space, [...] claustrophobia can also figure more generally as an indicator of the victim's sense of helplessness or horrified mental awareness of being enmeshed in some dark, inscrutable destiny" (Thomas ND; 4). In other words, there is self-awareness, on the part of the villain-hero, of the confines of their mind. This is to say that in Poe there is an added dynamic of situational irony in which the protagonist understands that though they may be physically free to act differently, mentally, they are not. On entrapment and imprisonment, Thomas writes, "[t]his sense of there being no way out contributes to the claustrophobic psychology of Gothic space" (Thomas ND; 9). This is to say, much of the anguish Poe's protagonists suffer comes from the self-conscious knowledge of inevitable mental internment. This seems to be the ironic epiphany that Poe's villain-hero's come to: that they are not only the imprisoning agent, and the imprisoned, but also the literal and metaphorical prison itself.

In light of this internal Poe-etic Gothic space, certain character traits emerge that are especially fruitful in creating such a self-aware embodied prison. From the Satanic, there is

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a perverse passion for “evil.” In other words, there’s an impulsive behavior trait, which prolongs the villain-hero’s pain and suffering. In the examples given, this ranges from the perpetuation of fear and necrophilia, to masochism. From the Promethean we see the internal synthesis of the good/bad duality, which also serves to perpetuate pain and suffering. For example, good is preserved through murder, fear is prolonged by staying alive; and a loved one is immortalized through self-generated madness. From the Byronic, other traits emerge that not only perpetuate pain and suffering, and synthesize the good with the evil, but also can be said to contextualize the gradual emergence of the internalized prison in the villain-hero by offering an obsessiveness from which materializes the inescapably villainous space.

The short story “William Wilson” is a doppelganger story in which the protagonist encounters his double, who is representative of the “good” binary, while William Wilson represents the “bad” binary. In this doppelganger story, the two binaries are synthesized, illustrating the amalgamated Poe-etic villain-hero/space. The protagonist’s doppelganger only seems to appear when Wilson does bad things, and finally when Wilson kills his doppelganger, he has his sudden realization. He narrates,

[t]he brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror,—had been perceptible before; and, as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait. (Poe 2004; 231).

This shows three important elements. First, there is a duality to the Satanic. Wilson does

bad deeds for the sake of them, such as cheating at cards. However, instead of one binary overcoming the other, the doppelgangers merge, with the act of “murder” and demonstrate that the dualities were never inherently separate entities—within one’s self exist the various capacities for good *and* evil. This can be seen as the Promethean trope, since the act of murder brings a deeper self-awareness to the protagonist, but the second thing to note about this dynamic is that self-awareness allows for the capacity to be simultaneously rebellious of the current situation, and creative as a response. That is, to be capable of re-assessing the situation, for better or worse. The third point is that the self-awareness of the narrator is an internal manifestation—though necessarily entangled with the materials and situations the protagonist finds themselves enmeshed with. They simultaneously become cognitively aware of who they are, and aware of the fact that they cannot rid themselves of that which they despise.

However, it is ambiguous as to whether Wilson has actually killed himself. One reading is that what is most important is that he has killed his duality. This is symbolic of the mind-space convergence of the Poe-etic villain-hero/space, as well as the internal shift to embody that mind-space. In addition to the Satanic and Promethean villain-heroes mentioned, William Wilson also embodies the Byronic as he comes from an upper-class family, has a blatant disregard for rules, he is obviously moody and secretive, all of which are imperative to his dishonest engagements with those around him.

A different type of Poetic villain-hero/space is located in “The Pit and the Pendulum”. This type delves deeper into the recesses of the villain-hero’s cognitive imprisonment, than that of “William Wilson”. What is interesting about the nuances of this story is that the protagonist, who is sentenced to death in a dungeon with different forms of torture, prolongs his pain and suffering by being intelligent enough to stay alive. In the dungeon there is a

pit, in which the fate that awaits, is unknown. The narrator explains, “[...] I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit, whose extent, of course, I had no means of ascertaining at the moment [...] to the victims of its tyranny, there was the choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors [...] resolving there to perish rather than risk the terrors of the wells” (Poe 2004; 309). This is to say that it is the fear of this “unknown” that keeps the protagonist away from the pit. His Promethean and Byronic intelligence keep him alive as he is able to outsmart his torturers, but it is his Poe-etic nature, which prolongs the torture. Though the protagonist is ultimately saved by the French army, at the time of torture he was facing imminent death, with no way of knowing that he would be rescued. (Il)logically speaking, to jump into the pit would have saved himself from unbearable torture. This is a deeply ingrained characteristic of the Poe-etic villain-hero/space, the fact that the unknown mental torture is more unbearable than physical torture, and yet, the villain-hero cannot bring themselves to leave that space, though there may be a physical way out.

Two poems, whose speakers also embody the Poe-etic villain-hero/space are “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven”. They are discussed together, because they illustrate different components of the necrophilic dynamic of the villain-hero/space. The speaker of “Annabel Lee” states, “[a]nd so, all the night tide, I lie down by the side/ of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,/ In her sepulcher there by the sea—” (Poe 2004; 76). The speaker has chosen to enter his Gothic space, physically (the sepulcher) and emotionally (through necrophilia). Skye Miles (ND) writes that one such way that necrophilia occurs is when a lover dies, “[...] but the love for the actual person remains, perverting itself into a continued romance with the earthly remains or a purposefully selected replacement” (Miles ND; 19). This is an instance of the Poe-etic villain-hero/space choosing to enter its prison to quench

its Byronic impulses.

Where this turns into a more intense masochistic dynamic, however, is in “The Raven”. The way the speaker knowingly asks questions of the bird, which elicits the same response “Nevermore”, implies an even more intense masochism (Poe 2004; 57-61). In “The Raven”, the speaker’s entrapment is not only self-perpetuated, but also recursive in that he amplifies its growing intensity. There seems to be no “outside” to this ongoing feedback loop. This is perhaps the most dramatic instance of the Poe-etic villain-hero/space, that there is some sort of perverse satisfaction—in this case by memorializing the memory of the lost Lenore—by driving one’s self deeper into the internal prison. Masochistic madness, while overt in “The Raven”, and subtly presented in the other poems and tales, is perhaps the most defining feature of the Poe-etic villain-hero/space—the prisoner/prison constitutes a recursive feedback loop of amplifying intensity and perverse solace.

What Poe’s villain-hero/space shows is that there is an inseparability of the mind from the prison. Poe’s narrators and speakers create their own Gothic spaces for different reasons, but ultimately they are grotesque manifestations of their own self-imposed imprisonment since their minds cannot help but dictate the illogicality of their behavior. These villain-hero/spaces demonstrate that the mind is the most punishing prison, but despite this, there is a deep-seated masochistic satisfaction in driving one’s self deeper into those villainous and unforgivingly cavernous depths.

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