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## **AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE DARK: DEATH, GUILT, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE QUESTION OF NORMALCY IN W. IRVING'S *THE ADVENTURE OF THE GERMAN STUDENT* AND E. A. POE'S *THE BLACK CAT* – A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING**

### **Abstract**

Washington Irving's short story "The Adventure of the German Student" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" express psychological complexity of such categories as death, guilt, or responsibility. Both narratives are imbued with Gothic elements such as imaging of emotional and intellectual disorders, supernatural phenomena, ominous atmosphere and others. Merging real and unreal elements, what is factual and what is imagery, opens both texts on the multiplicity of meanings. The aim of this article is an analysis of the gothic schemata and the concomitant themes of death, guilt and responsibility in the two stories, in the light of deconstructive criticism.

**Key words:** death, guilt, normalcy, Irving, Poe, deconstructive criticism

The pervasive themes of death and guilt, responsibility and aberrations from the states of normality unite the two significant examples of gothic fiction in American literary history: Washington Irving's *The Adventure of the German Student* and E. A. Poe's *The Black Cat*. As classic instances of stories which thematically approach and also cross the threshold of the dark, the darkness of human nature, the two narratives yield interesting results in a textual analysis which deploys the post-structuralist criticism and makes use of deconstructive tools. The rich gothic imagery in Irving's and Poe's texts causes the real and the unreal to merge. What is factual seems uncertain, what is regarded as normal undergoes an immediate deprecation. Though equally involving, the two stories execute numerous transgressions in meaning and shackle the text's seeming coherence in different ways. The first focuses on blurring the boundary between morality and immorality, the second thwarts the frontier between life and death. Both, however, centre on undercutting the firmness of the demarcating lines between the acceptable/the normal and the unthinkable/abnormal, as a result of which the covert meanings surface and subvert the reader's immediate response, thus disturbing the obviousness of an interpretative process.

Whereas Poe's story shows the mind enslaved by corrupt morality, Irving's narrative evokes a vision of preponderance, which begets a humanistic aporia; the subconscious creating the apotheosis of an absolute, unconditional love entangled in a wretched reversal of the cause-and-effect logic. The former, focusing on the absurd and the immoral, delves into the unclear frontiers between life and death. In the later, vigilance becomes the core of the character's tragic downfall; the fragile barriers between the conscious and the subconscious, the human and the inhuman collapse. The deployment of threshold shown in several transgressions in motifs and the lexical texture in Poe's story not only attests to Derrida's propounding of the untrustworthiness of language. Derrida's own formal and stylistic patterning in his philosophical writings also displays a sense of edginess. Comparing Derrida's philosophical discourse and Poe's language of prose, Jodey Castricamo makes an interesting commentary on the use of the various thresholds in Derrida's philosophical writings and Poe's prose, which form a particular totality:

The notion of threshold is important since it draws attention to the function of a border.

But it is also significant because it gives us insight into a writing practice which produces what might be called a "borderline" subject. By staging a radical resistance to any rigorous determination of borders [...] while continuing to trace along their edges, Poe and Derrida can be considered as *writing on the threshold*.<sup>1</sup>

Washington Irving's *The Adventure of the German Student*, being a classic example of an early horror story in the long history of gothic literature in America, generates an edgy amalgamation of idioms: allegory, and the uncanny, the unnatural and the realist. Its textual fiber, replete with gothic imagery, entreats a remonstrance of the definite meaning and sharply demarcated lines of the binary opposed pairs of entities. Elements of gothic setting, rendition of the theme of fiendish enslavement of the human soul, as well as the questions of normalcy and responsibility the text poses, analyzed from the perspective of the narrative's structural and linguistic patterning, give rise to a sense of the narrative's inconsistency and susceptibility to continual rearrangement. Irving's narrative fuses the esoteric and the real, the common and the paranormal in several ways, the full discussion of which would exceed the limits of this essay. Thus, I will focus on just some selected aspects by means of which it is done: characterization, plot and the narrative voice.

Irving's story strikes with a seeming simplicity. Its protagonist Wolfgang Gottfried, a raucous young German student, can be seen as a metaphor for a despicable trial of human goodness and psychological rectitude. While the story progresses, his boisterous attitude to life is violated and finally defeated. Typically of gothic fiction, the story opens on a stormy night. It is the time of the French revolution when Wolfgang meets in Paris a dream-like female creature, a beauty, the image of whom, strangely enough, haunts his mind even before it

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<sup>1</sup> C.J. Castricamo, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing* (Quebeck, 2001), p. 97.

reveals its malign signification. He finds her in the most outrageous milieu, close to a guillotine run down with blood. In no way would that produce a startling effect, had it not been for the least expected dénouement. The woman is admitted into Wolfgang's lodgings. There the plea of the everlasting love is uttered. In the morning the woman is found dead. The image of her head on the floor freezes the young lover; the figure of the woman is not a living body, but a most repugnant corpse. Most evidently Wolfgang's soul is captive to a demon.

An immediate query which comes to mind, taking into account the oddity of the story's anticlimax, concerns the state of being of the female character; is she a ghost or is she real? Ironically enough, Irving provokes us to view her as a human being only to close the storyline with a sudden volta – the female is an object of the most hideous fabrication, a phantasm. Resultantly, the text undermines the supposedly obvious oppositions of sum and substance, the tangible and the otherworldly. The etherealized love is mocked, the woman belongs both to an earthly order and to the supernatural. The solidity of the barrier between life and death is destroyed. The seeming docility of the female character, her perceptible submissiveness, are instantaneously questioned; the malicious, resistant side of the soul surfaces whence the acquiescence of the female's mental framework, the reader feels safe about, is deconstructed.

At this point, another pervasive feature of Irving's discourse emerges as significant. Characteristically for gothic fictions, Irving presents two realities: the surface reality and the reality beneath it. Wolfgang's insane excitement causes him to project his fantasy, imagining the woman to be alive, whereas he is embracing a dead body. This represents the workings of a demented mind, and the destruction of sane, reasonable conduct. The text gives us clues that Wolfgang clings to a reality which is not there. He asks the woman about the place where she lives, and on receiving the blood-freezing answer: "in the grave," he does not react in an expected way, remaining intoxicated by the woman's beauty. The paleness of her face, the oddity of her expression, the spine-chilling look of a person who was guillotined, convey no meaning to him. Likewise, the surprise on the face of the old portress who witnesses Wolfgang's malady – an act of dragging of the woman's dead body to his room does not incite him to abandon the cause of his malady. Wolfgang engages in the objectionable theories of his time. From the beginning of the story his mind is shown as impaired. Interestingly, his suffering from an obsessive indulgence in fantasizing about an ideal woman and ideal love seems to preclude the final mental dementia. A case can be made, however, for an inextricable paradox in the narrative's evocation of normalcy and aberrant psychological states. An impasse afflicts the thematically treated sanity and madness as the story draws the reader's attention to the fact that Wolfgang was sent to Paris for a change to ease his tortured mind. Ironically, the alteration of his psychical composure is contested by the very place which is expected to bring relief. This plunges us into the underside of the character's consciousness. Does the novelty of the milieu affect the insane mind or does it appropriate the past and surfaces what was hidden? An unanswerable query arises; the narrative seems to suggest a rather facile distinction between the supposed past clarity of the mind

and the present psychic imbalance, which is suggestive of a lack of the radical opposition it propounds.

A deconstructive approach to Irving's text seeks to show that apart from the internal contradictoriness in character molding, the text's explicitness and coherence are also never complete. On the level of structure and the use of the narrative voice, the story shows significant inconsistencies. For instance, while delineating the morose and awesome atmosphere of Paris in the time of the Revolution, Irving breaks up the last sentence of the first paragraph abruptly, and ends it with a sudden intrusion of the first person, unnamed narrator, to the effect of discontinuing the univocal narration: "the loud claps of thunder rattled through the lofty narrow streets – but I should first tell you something about this young German".<sup>2</sup> By the same token, the ending of the story posits the least expected fissure in narration; the omniscient narrative is resumed and then it is further destabilized by a somewhat artificial incorporation of an unanticipated dialogue between unnamed characters, two gentlemen of a wholly unknown provenience: "Here the old gentleman with the haunted head finished his narrative. 'And is this really a fact' said the inquisitive gentleman. 'A fact not to be doubted,' replied the other. I had it from the best authority. The student told it me himself. I saw him in a mad-house in Paris".<sup>3</sup> Here the narrative generates a whirlpool of the supposed credibility and incredibility of the narrated events, as the language of the passage dismantles the uniformity of significance and impedes the reliability of the narrative voice. In as much as the sheer simplicity in assessing the first person narrator as haunted astounds us, the immediacy of the implication of the believability, we take cognizance of, revolts against itself. The storyteller is the man with a haunted head and, most shockingly, the insane student is considered to be the best authority. Additionally, the supposed inquisitiveness of the listener narrows down to a question of utmost plainness, "And is this really a fact?".<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, the laconic reply, "a fact not to be doubted"<sup>5</sup> reverberates ominously and magnifies the effect of distrust. The imminence of the seemingly differing entities, 'haunted' and 'rational,' fact and doubt, forefronts the breaching of the sane and the insane. Resultantly, the story's text unleashes other meanings and further acknowledges the deconstructive premise that language defies the translucence of its explicatory function. This evidently subscribes to Derrida's post-structuralist dictum; as Abrams notices: "[He] proposes the alternative that we deliver ourselves over to a free participation in the free-play of signification opened up by the signs of the text".<sup>6</sup> Suggesting meanings and immediately provoking questions about their edges, the text of Irving's story releases senses which shake the surface or

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<sup>2</sup> W. Irving, "The Adventure of the German Student", [in:] *Fifty Great American Short Stories* (New York, 1964), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel", [in:] D. Lodge and N. Wood. *Modern Criticism and Theory, A reader* (London & New York, 2000), p. 246.

univocal interpretation. Is the text then inherently deceptive? Does it open itself to misrepresentation? The multifarious production of the text's meanings puts the reader in the position of a participant of an extremely liberating reading process, which allows fabrication and fiddling, but more importantly, involves the reader in the reading/writing of senses which never seem to finalize.

There are no doubt good reasons to see Irving's and Poe's narratives, though separated in time, as not only parallel in tone, but also in their deployment of gothic elements which result in unveiling the texts' subdued meanings. The amalgamation of allegory and surrealism, the merger of the lexical and emotive uncertainty, which help uncover the flimsiness of the barriers between the normal and paranormal, the sane and the insane in Irving's story are concordant with the mixture of mystery and psychopathology in Poe's story. "The Black Cat" shows the indefiniteness of contours of the human and animalistic, the normal and the aberrant. It is a story of moral transgression and perverseness, docility and belligerence, sanity and madness. It offers a classic, psychological study of man's moral decline, vulnerability to unreasonable, brutal deeds which surmount the controllable, sane mind. Being a product of the author's rich imagination, yet constrained by the need for a disciplined organization of the images of the most ghastly inhumane drives into a cohesive discourse, the narrative yields the deconstructionist perspectives on the multifarious nature of writing and meaning, as well as the self-referentiality of narrative and its univocal character.

As Marcus Cunliffe notices in a brief presentation of the substance of Poe's short stories, he "hardly differs from the mass of sensational writers who used the trappings of the Gothic Novel"<sup>7</sup>, and yet what distinguishes him is "the quality of intelligence and self-awareness".<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Baudelaire's succinct definition of the essence of Poe's gothic narratives, "Absurdity installing itself in the intellect, and governing it with a crushing logic," Cunliffe further elucidates Poe's excellence, singling out an aspect which will be of import in discerning the author's use of language patterns, both capturing a unique experience and expressing the elusiveness which is its intrinsic feature: "Though the ghastliness is occasionally overdone, it is made all the more nightmarish by the measured deliberation with which it is unfolded"<sup>9</sup>. Poe's use of language consists essentially in combining what is normally distinct, and making distinct what is normally commingled, the result of which is that the conventional concept of reality is questioned. Poe's narratives create a form of communication which expresses an absurd reality, the form in which commonplace distinctions are eliminated.

The opening lines of Poe's "The Black Cat" draw attention to an act of writing and the notions of meekness and violence, sanity and madness, logic and illogic, which the text deconstructs. The beginning is a scene of writing, embedding the scene of murder; the self-effacing first person narrator, the story's infamous protagonist, plunges us into a string of ghastly events, whence employing an

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<sup>7</sup> M. Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

unassuming position, both construing the horror and questioning the wickedness of what the storyline unveils. Resultantly, the preordained belittling of the evil nature of the most hideous events rouses the question of the narrative's credibility since the reader faces an enfeeblement of the most expected response of disgust and uneasiness to the shocks and distastefulness the narrative offers. At the story's outset the narrator importunes a stylish reluctance, strengthening the sensational effect of the narration: "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad I am not – and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburden my soul".<sup>10</sup>

Not only does the narrative juxtapose words like 'wild' and 'homely,' but effectively reduces the boundary between these opposite entities. Furthermore, it diminishes the distinct character of 'mere' and 'household' in the subsequent passage, by immediately following and opposing these by 'terrified,' 'tortured' and 'destroyed.' Such a design effects a linguistic instability and a sense of quandary; is this a narrative of horror and atrocity, or is this a story of a familiar, domesticated milieu, though tinted with some bizarre, vile exceptionalities. The narrator continuously disavows extraordinariness, recants the uncommon:

My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified – have tortured – have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me they presented little but horror – to many they will seem less terrible than baroques. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common-place – some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.<sup>11</sup>

The scene of writing, framing the story of a murder of an innocent animal, takes on an overtly confessional note; the narrator externalizes his self-judgment, disclosing the nature of his deed:

The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at one, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.<sup>12</sup>

Odd as it may seem, the verbal code for acts of murdering and writing is parallel, the two words expressing the meaning of writing and killing stem from the same root; a penknife is used in an act of bestiality and it is bestiality which is

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<sup>10</sup> E. A. Poe, "The Black Cat", [in:] R. DiYanni (ed.). *Literature, Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama and the Essay* (New York, 1990), p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

penned. The fusion of the lexical equivalence creates a peculiar effect. This will be later on echoed in yet another selection of a lexical item expressing the nastiness of the character's conduct, namely in the verb to 'bury.' Describing the scene of assassinating his wife, the narrator discloses the following: "I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain".<sup>13</sup> An act of burying an axe draws attention, anticipates and magnifies the horror of the subsequent perverse and vile act of burying the wife's corpse. The connections are invariably apt. Poe's use of lexical items in the scene of the horrid murder shows that the uniformity of language is destabilized as the new, suppressed senses can be uncovered. The villain wants to deprive his wife of the sane judgment of his insane deed; the brain being the site of reason and reasonable thinking.

The story's plot astounds with a minute account of man's moral degradation, a portrait of the workings of a disordered mind. Despite being a man of sensitivity and a lover of animals, in a sudden, uncontrollable furry provoked by his cat's apparent disregard of him, the villain snatches the brute and cuts out one of its eyes. Haunted by pricks of conscience, one day he hangs the unfortunate animal. Then, a horrifying mixture of regret, morbid sensitivity and perverseness incite him to make up for the loss and admit in the household another cat, resembling in every respect the former one. Had it not been enough, in a drunken stupor, while attempting to annihilate the second cat, he kills his wife, who is determined to protect the innocent creature. In order to conceal the signs of the murder he walls her corpse in the cellar. The unraveling of the enigma of the most hideous burial becomes the unveiling of the mystery of his consciousness and perverse nature.

Poe deploys here one of the typical techniques of a gothic, sensational narrative; he offers a grotesque sort of doubling; the first cat murdered is replaced by another, dramatically reminiscent of the former one. The first cat's mutilation is followed by a sign of justice – the house is mysteriously burnt, and on one of the remaining walls there appears a most bizarre phantasm – a gigantic black cat – the sign of crime. Ironically, the second black cat, being a witness of the crime, becomes walled up within the tomb, and on the discovery of the dead body it is also found, ominous and triumphant, seated on the victim's head. Metaphorically, the solid barrier between life and death is pictured as non-existent. The tomb contains a living creature, and it is not a tomb in a conventional meaning. Undoubtedly, there are good reasons to probe the poststructuralist territory of an analysis of Poe's discourse. The communally accepted clashes and separations are no more than of enigmatic value in his prose. The ties across the earthly and the unearthly mark almost all of Poe's stories: "The Oval Portrait," "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher" to mention the most important ones. As Cunliffe puts it, "Poe's deaths are of special order. It is no man's land between death and life that obsesses him, and the strange obsessive vampirism the dead with the living [...] This is the desperation of Poe's story-world: life webs away, swiftly and remorselessly, yet death does not bring peace. For him nothing is stable or sweet".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Cunliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

Significantly, the cat becomes a metaphor for blameworthiness, an imprint of a guilt-ridden conscience since its ghostly apparition underlies the supernatural behind the unveiling of the sinister truth. Equally importantly, the image of a cat is an encapsulation of a deconstructive reading of the narrative. It is construed both as a living creature and a sign which inscribes opposites. In the figure of a cat docility meets anger and violence, the vile paradoxically accords with the gullible, the susceptible encounters the mischievous.

The cat is a symbol of the superstitious, the phobia of one's exposure to the perverse, as much as the externalization of the perverse, the fear of unmasking the deepest recesses of a diseased, unstable mind. Curiously, the cat's body becomes a corporeal inscription of the wretched act of assassination. Abstruse as it may seem, such an inscription, the most morose form of writing as an ingenious device conforms to the overall structural pattern of the story; the story of murders is embedded in the story of writing. The story within the story, belonging to Poe's narrative codification, attests to what Eve Kosofsky Segwick notices as phenomenal in gothic fiction: "The story within [...] represents the broadest structural application of the otherwise verbal or thematic convention of the unspeakable, it has a similar relation to the convention of the live burial. The live burial that is a favorite conventual punishment in Gothic novels derives much of its horror not from the buried person's loss of outside activities (that would be the horror of dead burial), but from the continuation of a parallel activity that is suddenly redundant".<sup>15</sup>

The most macabre effect of the link between two states of being is achieved by means of the image of the imprisoned cat, which is placed in the intermediary state between life and death, but also the cat plays a mediatory function; its body serves as a corporeal inscription, writing and reading in the figure of the cat collide and become inextricable. The undermining of such dualities as life and death, sanity and madness, human and animalistic, writing and reading, in Poe's story testifies to the fallibility of the language, which the deconstructive criticism proposes. Significantly, it is Poe's gothic imagery which disencumbers textual paradoxes. As it was shown previously on the example of Irving's story, the deconstructive method of analyzing Poe's text also allows one to classify it as emblematic of the concept of a decentered universe propounded by Jacques Derrida. We may follow Peter Barry's succinct explanatory remarks, which underline Derrida's proclamation that we cannot speak of texts as coherent artistic artifacts, but are rather compelled to recognize their centerlessness.<sup>16</sup>

Without doubt, one can say that the density of the gothic imagery in the two analyzed texts opens them to a variety of interpretative perspectives, probably the most distinguishable being the psychoanalytic stance. The selection of the deconstructive method aimed at tackling the obtrusiveness of fissures and

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<sup>15</sup> E. Kosofsky Segwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York, 1986), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> P. Barry, *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York, 2002), p. 68.



linguistic idiosyncrasies in them. The shifts in meaning resulting in new, as well as counter-senses, elated a pursuit of the unreliability of language in the two stories.

In conclusion, it must be highlighted that it is the very fusion of the esoteric and the real, the common and the uncanny, rational and irrational executed by means of gothic imagery in Washington Irving's "The Adventure of the German Student" and E. A. Poe's "The Black Cat" that demonstrates the instabilities of the texts' meaning and their narrative structure. An analysis of the gothic schemata and the concomitant themes of death, guilt and responsibility in the two stories, in the light of deconstructive criticism, enhanced a recognition of the narratives' other senses. The breaching of life and death, the human and animalistic, the sane and insane become impossible possibilities. The richness of gothic imagery commences the surfacing of the covert, and puzzles with the flimsy boundaries between the supposedly opposed pairs of meanings, engaging the reader into a capacious Derridean interpretative process. Impossible possibilities, unreliable realities, the forever shifting qualities of the hidden and the cruel, juxtaposed against the overt, and the tamed; the desolate, worthless, distorted and wretched versus the sublime and spiritually uplifting, the earthly and the unearthly produce textual paradoxes and rebut a univocal reading. Finally, pushing the gothic formula beyond the intermediary zones, both Irving and Poe deny the validity of such fundamental concepts as the principle of causality, continuity or non-contradiction, as the representations of the nightmarish qualities of being assert very strongly the arbitrariness of language and express the uniqueness of an individual artistic vision.

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## **Na progu ciemności: śmierć, wina, odpowiedzialność i zagadnienie normalności w opowiadaniach *Przygoda niemieckiego studenta* W. Irvinga oraz *Czarny kot* E. A. Poe – próba dekonstrukcji**

### **Streszczenie**

Opowiadanie Washingtona Irvinga *Przygoda niemieckiego studenta* i Edgara Allana Poe *Czarny kot* wyrażają psychologiczną złożoność takich kategorii jak: śmierć, wina, czy odpowiedzialność. Obie narracje przepełnione są elementami gotyckimi, takimi jak: obrazowanie zaburzeń emocjonalnych i intelektualnych, zjawiska ponadnaturalne, złowieszcza atmosfera i inne. Przemieszanie elementów surrealistycznych i realistycznych, tego, co zwyczajne i tego, co ponadnaturalne, otwiera oba teksty na wielość znaczeń. Celem artykułu jest analiza elementów prozy gotyckiej w obu tych opowiadaniach w świetle teorii dekonstruktywistycznej. Jej rezultatem jest ukazanie intertekstualnych aluzji oraz dekonstrukcji opozycyjnych znaczeń i ich nieograniczoności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** śmierć, wina, normalność, Irving, Poe, dekonstruktywizm