



The Grotesque Elements in Poe’s “Black Cat” and Scudder’s “The White Cat”

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Abstract

The present essay focuses on the grotesque elements in Edgar Allan Poe’s the “Black Cat” and Horace Scudder’s “The White Cat”. Poe’s story is highly embedded with a lot of grotesque elements from the beginning to the end. These elements were presented through strange characters, mysterious happenings, and degradation through death. Poe represents the struggle between the supernatural and the natural which he reinforces through the narrator who struggles to commit wrongdoings. Even in the mist of trying to restrict himself, the narrator still does not know what he did. In “The White Cat,” Scudder employs grotesque elements as well but his application is subtly done unlike Poe whose application is more pronounced. The underlying meaning of this short story is on the spell of enchantment. However, Scudder, like Poe, displays the supernatural events through the characters of the “fairies” who has magical power to change the once a beautiful princess to a white cat. Grotesque includes absurd and bizarre elements and pierces the conventional version of reality. However, in its ability to shock or offend, grotesque helps to expose the vulnerability in human depicted via these absurd elements which will be explained in details in the present study.

Keywords: Grotesque, Mystery, Strange Character, Death

1. Introduction

Grotesque has long existed way back, though the application of the term in the 21st century differs from the one in the 18th and 19th centuries. The word grotesque was not originally known as such, but was known by a Latin word called “grotto” which originated from Greek *krypte* “hidden place”, meaning a small cave or hollow. Grotesque was used in French as early as 1532 and in English in 1640. Its early usage was restricted to the antique painting which was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries particularly in Italy (the grotesques of Raphael). In France, it was extended to non-artistic work and literature in the 16th century (Rabelais uses it with reference to parts of the body). However, it was widely used in English and Germany in the 18th century. Grotesque swivels into a wider meaning, especially to a topic widely discussed during 19th century by aesthetic caricatures, which Wolfgang Kayser (1963 13) calls “a loss of substance in the word, meaning the suppression of the horrifying or eerie qualities of the grotesque and a corresponding over-emphasis on the ridiculous and bizarre.” Clayborough (1965) also notes:

The word grotesque thus came to be applied in a more general fashion during the Age of Reason and of Neo-Classicism--when the characteristics of the grotesque style of art—extravagance, fantasy, individual taste, and the rejection of the natural conditions of organization' are the object of ridicule and disapproval. The most general sense which it has developed by the early eighteenth century is therefore that of "ridiculous, distorted, unnatural' (adj.); 'an absurdity, a distortion of nature' (noun). (6)

These attitudes towards grotesque as just a painting continued to the 19th and even to the early 20th century. In 1957, Kayser came out with a book entitled *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* in which the word grotesque was treated with such critical evaluation and attention to the back drop of previous generation. Also, Thomson observes, “the most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque has been the fundamental element of disharmony, constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous element, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying” (Thomson, 1979 16). Thomson continues, “It is important that this disharmony has been seen, not merely in the work of art as such, but also in the reaction it produces and in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist” (Thomson 1979 20). Although this view was heard by the previous century, it also helps to open the eyes of every reader to a wide range of grotesque viewed by different scholars instead of narrowing down to few viewpoints. According to Burke, through a perspective animated by incongruity as distinct from the genre of comedy, however, the grotesque is a “cult of incongruity without the laughter” (1984 58). In relation to this notion, the present view does not assert that the grotesque is without comedy but that the degree of comedy varies. In other words, the grotesque cuts across any logical boundaries even though “such application may seem at first irrelevant, incoherent, or anarchic” (Burke, 1984, 10). Grotesque then functions as a tool

mainly for unveiling deep, shared structure within aesthetic, political and spiritual domains, deeply employed in recent literary works, like Poe and Scudder applications of grotesque in their work to disrupt the familiar world of reality, inured to introduce a different more mysterious reality, which was vividly showed in both selected short stories. However, this aesthetic forms well-suited both authors' desire to create discomfort and unease in the mind of the reader in order to confront them with an unfamiliar reality

According to Kayser, grotesque has the "power of evoking in audience or reader a sense of the radical alienness of the world, its 'estrangement' from man, and its essential absurdity from its point of view in the 1950s, that the contemporary fulfillment of the grotesques traditions is the theater of the absurd" (1963 15). Thus, Kayser came out with this outcome in mind after a generalization of the aesthetic principle that "the unity of the perspective in the grotesque consists in an unimpassioned view of life as an empty, meaningless puppet play" (12). This buttress the point where a satiric purpose was most served by the imaginative exploration of a fantastic, alienated deformed world in previous centuries, but the grotesques in the twentieth century, according to Kayser, traces an arbitrary course and no longer signals a need for moral or social correctives (1963 8).

Though there are a lot of grotesques elements, only the following elements are selected to discuss in the present study: fear/horror, strange characters, degradation through deaths, and mysterious and the inexplicable events.

2. Grotesques in Poe's "Black Cat"

2.1 Fear/Horror

The "Black Cat" is Poe's most popularly read short story. The story follows a style of literature that tends to explore the human and fascination with the supernatural or the unknown grotesque application in a literary work that helps to explore human's emotions in the face of forces which cannot understand most especially the fear:

Neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of Rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight — an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off — incumbent eternally upon my hear! (Poe 1845 43)

According to Thomson, grotesque is the unresolved clash of incompatible in the work and response. It is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque (1979 27). Some of the motifs of grotesque are darkness, horror scenes, stories or scenes of this nature that capture our understanding and excite us or give us a thrill of horror to savor. Perverseness happens to be one of the major issues in this short story where the writer had to dwell on the feeling of guilt of the narrator as a form of fear by focusing more on his declining state of mind, or mental breakdown from the start to the end of the story. He was able to demonstrated the intense circumstances of a person who is suffering from loss of mind can be horrific, this could be seen from the act of the narrator who was overtaken by the spirit of perverseness which surprises even him, considering his crime which he could have no longer control over, this later brought him to his destruction through his series of acts which make the elements of horror very apparent in this story

2.2 Strange Character

According to Kayser, grotesque is the expression of a strange and alienated world that is familiar from a perspective which is suddenly renders strange (presumably, this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying, or both) (qtd. in Thomson, 1979 18). By this he means a total transformation of our world in which the familiar and the natural elements "suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous" (qtd. in Thomson 1979 17). Further, this brings us to a shift in reality and defies explanation; rules, laws and natural norms that are all suspended, "the artist therefore created a fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of status, the loss of identity, the distortion of natural sign and shape, destruction of the personality, and fragmentation of the historical order" (Adams & Yates 1997 17). Poe's usage of animals in the short story signifies the use of animal in a grotesque literature. The aforementioned black cat death led to the appearance of another which looks exactly like the former black cat called Pluto but with one distinct feature, a white fur at the breast region of the cat which enlarges in size, until it had the image of a "gallows", it was first noticed by the wife, who still releases same love and likeness she once had for Pluto to this particular cat. The narrator was perplexed at the sight of the second cat at the "bar it was a black cat- a very large one- fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one", he did make enquiry of the owner but nonetheless, he brought the cat home. The cat displays some strange traits "fastening his long and sharp claws in his dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast" this causes the narrator a great deal of worries "absolute dread of the beast" (43) whose terrifying mode causes the narrator to experience a sleepless night "to find the breath of the thing upon my face and its weight-an incarnate night-mare that I had no power to shake off-incumbent eternally from my heart" (43). The second cat appearance not only is strange in itself but also comes to avenge the cruelty of the narrator, which send him to the hand of the hang-man, waiting to be hang for the murder of his wife. "Upon her head with red extended mouth of solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduce me into murder, whose informing voice has consigned me to the hangman, I had walled the beast up in the cellar" (Poe 1845 46), the narrator laments about the death sentence the beast had brought upon him. Now, he has no opportunity to escape from his act because he is already waiting for death sentence behind bar.

2.3 Death through Degradation

Death was used as a medium through which degradation and humiliation was expressed in this short story. Death in this story is depicted as horrific and outlandishly executed by the narrator. First the killing of the black cat by hanging it to a tree causes his whole house to be burned down, except for the wall where the black cat hangs untouched; followed by the murder committed by the narrator to his wife using the axe and hiding her in the concealed walls. But later it was discovered and caused him to be given the death sentence for which he is waiting. On the night that this act was

committed, the narrator was aroused from sleep by cry that his house was on fire. The fire was mysterious though, just the man, wife and a servant escaped the ravaging fire that consumes all except the wall where the cat hung was untouched by the fire, sequence to the death of the cat, the narrator who killed the wife in an attempt of the wife to restrict him from killing the cat “But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacs, i withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her” brain” (Poe 1845 43).

2.4 *Mysterious and Inexplicable Event*

Corey describe grotesque as a form that breaks the boundaries of normalcy (1997 46). The author creatively uses the scream from the back of the cellar to create a deep suspense, the narrator who mistakenly walled the brute beast without his knowledge and the breast was left behind the wall for such a long time without suffocation and his scream sends him to the hand of the hang man over the murder of his wife and the unjust treatment of the cat which he came to avenge. According to Kelly Hurley,

abnormal human is not quite human. It is something that loss the human being or becoming not itself. It is outcast the trait of abnormal human could be present through physical and mental. The abnormal physical human can be informed of monsters creature, for example, snake, woman, dog man while abnormal mental human are presented through strange behaviors such as madness, addicted drunk, this feature create more frightening and horror scene. (2004 12)

The narrator’s behavior changes from a pet lover to a hater of pet or better still feeling of attraction to a repulsive feeling towards his pet. This helps to create an atmosphere of horror “I alone fed him, and he attended me to wherever I went about the house.it was even with great difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the street” (Poe 38). Also, “even Pluto began to experience the effect of my ill temper” and “grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket” (Poe 39). The writer uses these scenes to expose the abnormality in the narrator, who unleash the most terrible crime on his pet during the hanging: “I slipped a noose about its neck and hang it to a limb of a tree-hung it with tears streaming from my eyes” (Poe 39). This might sound ironical but the author was able to juxtapose humor and horror which was mostly evoked through the contrast disposition of the narrator’s tone and the crime committed, although he expresses fear: “tomorrow I die, and today I would unburden my soul”, (Poe 37), but he later ridicules the crime to call the event as a “series of household event”, also, the narrator regretted to have given-in to alcohol, which (he) said had caused or rather instigated his action which has now brought him before the hangman “much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town” (38). At this point, human instincts were dead, possessed with demonic made possible through alcohol, and the reappearance of the black cat to avenge in allusion to the popular law of karma “what goes around comes around” bringing the readers to a stand-still, surprised, fear, attraction just to mention but few.

In another mysterious incident as accounted by the narrator though insane, he asserts that the shape of the cat with hanging noose was imprinted on a wall of his old house, the only wall left standing after the fire. Though this may seem natural through his narration but beyond the surface meaning there seems to be some supernatural hands at work which we cannot see with our optical eyes, and cannot explain. More also the white fur located around the breast region of the cat which seems to enlarge every day has similar strange effect.

3. Grotesques in Scudder’s “White Cat”

3.1 *Strange Character*

The white cat in Scudder’s short story was depicted by the author to take the stead of the human, performing all the functions of the human “when the door opened and a lovely little cat came in. She wore a long black veil, and was accompanied by a number of cats” (Scudder 133). Although cats are pets, domesticated and easily accessible to human beings, this does not make them human or able to perform the roles of human. But the white cat in Scudder’s short story did not only render help, but also had dinner on the table with human using cutlery. There was also the appearance of numerous cats as steward, guards with sword which really make the scene strange. In another instance, she offers to help the prince out of his own predicament on how to get “the finest little dog on earth”, and could tell the intent of the heart of the prince even before he speaks. The prince was surprised at her display of inner-knowledge of human heart. At this point, the prince begins to doubt the cat not to be a “pussy”. This prompted the prince to ask her to tell him her history but “she only shook her head mournfully and sighed” (Scudder 1919 133).

The white cat’s life is different from other normal cats by talking like a human, offering help to humans who are in need, having her own world, a world of accommodation “she came straight up to the prince, and in a sweet, sad little voice bade him welcome. Then she ordered supper to be served, and the whole company sat down together” (Scudder 1919 134), and provides solution to human problems. Horace creatively uses the white cat to depict this act, and the effect it instills is the fear of life rather than the fear of death, for the life what it offers is so horrifying in its “suddenness and surprise” (Adams & Yates 1997 17). This the author succeeded to create in the mind of the readers through the cat, whose role has undergone “the fragmentation of the historical order” (Adams & Yates 1997 17).

3.2 *Mysterious and Inexplicable Event*

The young prince who also is the narrator was at this point tired since he travelled through the jungles, in the rain and sun for a long period of time. Thus, he needed a place to lay down his weary head. There was a giant gate of a beautiful castle in front of him, but he was shy to go in because his clothes were all drenched with rain stained with red mold, but he was immediately stupefied that why the gate flew open mysteriously and “a number of beautiful white hands appeared, and beckon to him to cross the courtyard and enter the great hall”, (Scudder 132). The narrator stood stupefied, after he had sat down, the invincible hands proceeded to take off his wet, muddy clothes and dress him in a “magnificent suit of silk and velvet”(Scudder 1919 132). The narrator attempted to comprehend what was happening to him in reference to “the grotesque as an incomprehensible force that has no name” (Adams & Yates 17). Then, he was

immediately led by same invincible hands to a “brilliantly lighted room” to have supper with invincible hands who were dinning with him. This scene shocks the reader as well as the narrator, amidst trying to understand the situation of the palace, he beheld a “bracelet upon her paw” (Scudder 134). This was mystic for a cat with a bracelet, on his inquiry, “she sighed and seemed so sad”, (Scudder 134). He was yet again conducted by the same hand to his sleeping place which was made by same hands.

The narrator and the reader were once again thrown off balance through Horace’s in-depth depiction of the mysteriousness of his character “white cat” on the knowledge of his departure (the prince) to his father’s palace. With respect to the mission, they were all set out to accomplish, he was presented with a “acorn” by the cat, with a warning attached to it never to open the “acorn” until he gets to his kingdom. The narrator is surprised how on earth will “the prettiest little dog” be in an “acorn”, but to shed his doubt the cat took the acorn closer to his ear and he could hear “a little dog’s bark” (Scudder 136). At the presentation of the acorn containing the little dog, he was mocked, laughed at by his brothers. But when he finally broke it open, the whole palace stood mystified at the beauty and radiance of the little do. This alludes to what Harpham said about grotesque that “the grotesque can be recognized by the fact that they do not fit our standard categories of identification .They defy logical, physical ontological categories that are used to make sense out of things”(qtd. in Adams & Yates 30). It means that the grotesque elements are beyond human explanations and tends to break the code of nature. In another instance, the king yet again set before them another task to go get “a piece of cambric” so fine that it would pass through the eyes of a “needle”, he yet again went to the cat who in turn gave him “walnut”, telling him it contains the finest muslin he could ever thought about. On getting to the palace he was surprised at the finest muslin brought by his brothers, but on cracking the walnut as directed by the cat, he found hazel-nut. He cracked again and found a cherrystone, inside was a grain of wheat, he crack again, found a grain of millet-seed, at this point he felt he has been deceived by the white cat, he instantly felt that “a cat’s claw scratch him gently” (Scudder 139). He cracked one more time and found the finest piece of cambric as earlier predicted by the cat.

The last task set before them by the father was to come home with the most beautiful princess that the sun had never shone on, and one who can mount her station as the princess and dish out orders to her subject. On reaching the white cat’s palace she promise to introduce him to the prettiest princess the sun has never shone on. On the eve before his return the princess begged him earnestly to cut off her head and her tail and cast them into the flame, he decline, but after much persuasion, he finally consented to her request, no sooner had he cast the stuff into the flame, a beautiful princess appeared where the body of the cat had been not only is this scene inexplicable but also breaks the boundaries of normalcy described by Corey; the appearance of the beautiful princess from the same spot further supports that fact an element can be mysterious, inexplicable, and at the same time abnormal in itself.

4. Similarities between Poe’s “The Black Cat” and Scudder’s “The White Cat”

The grotesque is experienced as an incomprehensible force that has no name. Kayser suggests that it is “objectification of the IT, the ghostly IT. We can relate this to the world we know; we have no orientation to comprehend it, if we could name it, it will lost its essential quality of grotesque” (qtd. in Adams & Yates 17). This the author cleverly did with creative in-depth shown in his work, “Black Cat” which earned him the nickname “father of the detective story” as asserted Sri Arthur Conan, creator of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, once wrote. Moreover, both stories share almost the same semblance except for some few instances. The authors depicted characters who are strange. In Poe’s “Black Cat” and Horace “The White Cat,” both cats were used differently by the authors. Poe used the black cat as a strange character owning to its, coming back to avenge his death, by exposing the narrator over the murder of his wife to the police of which he is awaiting death behind bar, while in Horace the “white cat” was unique in her own world in which she took upon herself the role of human being, attending to human needs, accommodating them as well. Horace uniquely depicted this strange act by this strange character in this short story, even to the extent dressed in human form uttering speeches with so much clarity.

Both stories depict the presentation of the mysterious and inexplicable. In Poe’s “The Black Cat”, the appearance of the second cat with same features as Pluto, and the loud shout from the cat that was mistakenly walled in cellar by the narrator and the cat’s position right on the head of the woman was something inexplicable and mysterious even the narrator was stupefied at the notice of the cat behind the wall because it was with great care he walled, leaving no trace behind.

In the second story, Horace depicted same elements at different intervals, first the “acorn” that contains the little white dog, secondly the “walnut” that contains the finest piece of cambric in the world. Lastly, the “head and tail” of the cat, which was cut off by the prince and later brought about the resurgence of the once enchanted princess by the “fairies,” the appearance of the invincible hands at the castle of the princess, to serve supper, took off the prince clothes, usher him to his bed room, wore him his clothes, and directed him everywhere in the castle. The author also depicts the use of a “wooden horse” (Scudder 136), as a medium of transport to the palace. This was really inexplicable that how on earth a lifeless horse can transport the prince from the “white cat” castle to his palace.

5. Conclusion

Grotesque was employed by Poe in an in-depth manner to arouse the mysterious and inexplicable events, strange/abnormal characters and degradation through death. Although the grotesque elements vary, they are related to each other through the definition given. Moreover, a grotesque story is not a supernatural story as it where, but underneath this story lies a serious message which is creatively crafted with the use of the grotesque elements. It is a powerful tool used by the authors to arouse in the reader some awareness of some specific issues and how to make changes or amendment.

The cat in “The Black Cat” played an integral role in this short story not only as a grotesque character but also mysterious. Some of the events in this story buttress this fact, “loud scream” and more, the story could be seen as

rationally and humanly possible but could also be impossible or unlikely to happen, especially the scene of the cat walled behind the wall, could naturally be possible with the knowledge of the waller but even without the knowledge of the waller for the cat to stay so long a time and could still scream is really grotesque. The purpose of grotesque in this short story is to provoke and arouse the feeling of the readers through violence, wickedness, supernatural events, and cruelty to people and animal. Poe's "Black Cat" is highly embedded with a lot of grotesque elements from the beginning to the end. These elements were presented through strange characters, mysterious happening, and death through degradation. Poe uses this character to represent the struggle between the supernatural and the natural which he reinforces through the narrator who struggles with himself to do "wrong for the wrong sake", even in the mist of trying to restrict himself, he still does not know while he did what he did, this he gave to "alcohol" to instigate his actions on the ground of which he is been squeeze in the hand of the hang man.

In the second novel "The White Cat" Scudder employs grotesque elements as well but his application is subtly done unlike Poe whose application is more pronounced. The underlying meaning of this short story is on the spell of enchantment. Scudder once again like Poe display the supernatural event through the characters of the "fairies" who in this story used magical power to change the once a beautiful princess to a white cat, rendering human services to human being. In another instance we could see how the author uses the white invincible hands in the story to carry out all the necessary services in the text and the mysterious death of the white cat (through head and tail cut) to bring alive the once enchanted princess.

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