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A PREDICTION OF RUIN: SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY AS PLOT DEVICE IN POE'S "THE TELL-TALE HEART"

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Abstract: The Poean protagonist is an impulsive, almost-neurotic individual who inhabits a universe of doom and horror. The impulsiveness one encounters in Poe's stories, however, does not indicate a lack of purpose. Poe was very meticulous in constructing his fiction. His choice of diction, tone, and narrative and his conception of characters are all dedicated to creating a unified, unique effect on the reader. To move his stories forward and create a deliberate totality, he often employs the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. This paper aims to explore this concept in Poe's 1843 short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" and the way it functions as a plot device to achieve totality. I also attempt to propose a formula for the Poean protagonist's self-fulfilling prophecy that can be applied to other short stories of Poe. The formula can be summarized as follows: subjective misinterpretation → ominous prediction → nagging obsession (planning) → wicked action (murder) → frantic confession (self-destruction).

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Self-Fulfilling Prophecy, Self-Destruction, The Tell-Tale Heart, Short Fiction

The haunting impulsiveness of the protagonists of Edgar Allan Poe is contradicted by the fact that they are very carefully created, and their actions are purposely subversive with one single goal: to create a strong effect on the reader. The characters, the plot, the choice of diction, the chain of events, the imagery, and all other literary elements and devices are woven together into one single entity to produce a unified Poean totality— or what Poe calls the “unity of effect.” A signature technique of his work is the employment of self-fulfilling prophecies. The latter not only function as the harbingers of the doom that would befall upon the hero but also aid Poe in producing the desired effect on the reader.

This paper attempts to examine the notion of self-fulfilling prophecy in Poe's 1843 short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” and the way the former functions as a plot device to achieve totality. The objective is to use the short story as a prime example and propose a literary formula for the Poean construction of his protagonists' self-fulfilling prophecies. This formula is quinquupartite and can be summarized as follows: subjective misinterpretation → ominous prediction → nagging obsession (planning) → wicked action (murder) → frantic confession (self-destruction). By definition, “a literary formula is a structure of narrative or dramatic conventions employed in a great number of individual works” (Cawelti 5). Thus, the formula proposed herein can surely be applied to other works of Poe.

In his 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story collection *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe theorizes that a good author must *intentionally* determine the impact he desires his story to have on the reader. The author then, Poe further explains, must employ all the literary elements and devices at his disposal to create this effect. In Poe's words:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with *deliberate care*, a certain *unique or single effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this *preconceived* effect. If his very initial sentence

tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one *pre-established design* (298-299, emphasis is mine)

The idea that the tone and the choice of diction from the onset of the story should both be dedicated to a “pre-established design” is of great importance to Poe’s views on short fiction and the unity of effect. In his 1846 article “The Philosophy of Composition,” he restates his position that a literary work must begin with “the consideration of an effect” (1). To this end, Poe continues, an apt blend of literary elements should be sought after to formulate the chosen effect (1).

According to Poe, there is a close relatedness between the length of the literary work and its author’s ability to concoct an impactful totality. This “unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting” (Poe, “Review” 298). When reading a literary text requires multiple sittings, the work “deprives itself . . . of the immense force derivable from totality” (Poe, “Review” 298).

This “totality” then rests on three major pillars: the desired effect that is set in motion from the *very beginning* of the text, the ability of the reader to finish the text in one sitting, and the ability of the author to utilize the necessary literary tools to achieve the effect. In many of Poe’s stories, these three factors are joined together by self-fulfilling prophecies. The reader often encounters Poean protagonists who prophesize their own perdition and establish the unique formula in which prediction precedes destruction.

Formulated by notable American sociologist William Isaac Thomas, the Thomas Theorem stipulates that “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (qtd. in Merton 475). A self-fulfilling prophecy is thus “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true” (Merton 477). The mere proclamation of wrong predictions, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, can become the catalyst for the development of behavioral patterns that can bring about these predictions (Marshall 2615).

Merton further states that a “reign of error” is usually sustained by the self-fulfilling prophecy’s deceptive reliability (477). The latter is the result of the predictor’s firm belief that the “actual course of events” is a testimony to his sound predictions (Merton 477). In this respect, a person’s perception of a situation is not exclusively construed by the dictates of its “objective features;” it is highly influenced by his subjective perception of it (Merton 475-476).

Furthermore, in Merton’s view, the *unplanned* results of actions are divided into three categories (Marshall 2615). First, there are those that “comprise latent functions” since they are “functional for a designated system;” second, there are those considered “latently dysfunctional” because they are so in a given “system;” and third, there are those “irrelevant to the system since they have no functional consequences” (Marshall 2615).

One must note here that these types are highly subjective and can be subject to confusion (Marshall 2615). Also, “unanticipated consequences” are extremely unreliable when it comes to understanding the concept of “function” since they remain unknown until they occur (Marshall 2615).

That said, “unanticipated consequences” can still have an impact on “future actions” (Marshall 2615). Individuals frequently misinterpret social situations and can behave in a way that generates “unanticipated consequences” (Marshall 2615). The latter, therefore, can play a major role in social action at a “micro-level,” and a “special case of this is the self-fulfilling prophecy” (Marshall 2615).

Psychologically, the notion of self-fulfilling prophecy can be described as the “I-told-me-so syndrome” (Little 5). Little further explains that when a person expects himself to fail,

he would effectuate his own failure (5). The same goes for internal states of mind. Predicted anxiety can become real anxiety (Little 5). One, consequently, can “be a failure, suffer rejection, experience low self-esteem and even have accidents just by practicing negative expectation,” Bill L. Little writes. And this is exactly the case with many of Poe’s neurotic protagonists whose prophesied ruin becomes very real.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s most signature short stories. It features the confession of an unnamed, disturbed character who murders the old man with whom he lives. Strikingly, early in the story, the protagonist admits that his crime is unreasoned and that his main motive is the hatred he has towards the dreadful, “vulture eye” of the victim. After careful planning and when the unspeakable deed has been done, the murderer dismembers the body and hides it under the planks of a wood flooring, thus fully erasing the evidence— apart from the last scream of the old man. A neighbor informs the police about the scream, and officers of the law pay a visit to investigate the report. Confident that he has committed the perfect crime, the narrator invites them in and places their chairs over the spot where the old man is buried. However, the protagonist starts hearing “ringing in [his] ear” and becomes “very pale.” Believing that the “ringing” is “the beating of [the] hideous heart” of his victim, the hero collapses under the pressure of guilt and confesses his crime to the police.

Remaining true to his concept of the unity of effect, Poe, from the very beginning, determines the tone of the entire story by his choice of words. His protagonist is “dreadfully nervous.” He keeps on asserting his sanity only to immediately reveal to us afterward that he is diseased and that his “disease had sharpened [his] senses:”

TRUE! —nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story (3)

According to philosopher David N. Stamos, “sometimes Poe makes a connection between madness and accentuated sense perception,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” is a good instance of that (381). From the story’s onset, the reader is ushered into Poe’s dark universe in which the protagonist’s mental illness (underscored by repeated denial) functions as a precursor of a vicious killing. The tone of the narrative and each word the narrator utters are carefully selected to facilitate the achievement of a unified effect. This perverse totality is attained through the employment of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the main character’s fantasized murder turns into a real murder.

In attestation to his insanity, in the second paragraph, the protagonist not only declares that he has no legitimate reason to kill the old man but also proclaims his love for him:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold (3)

A self-fulfilling prophecy, as explained earlier, entails a person’s faulty interpretation of a situation that derives from internal states of mind rather than from the actual objective circumstances. This leads to ominous predictions born out of subjective anxieties. As a result, the person’s behavior is influenced, and he unconsciously achieves his own prophecy. In the above lines, one can flush out all these elements.

First, the narrator acknowledges that he has no idea how the intrusive, gripping thought of killing the old man “entered [his] brain.” Second, he is fully aware that there are no legitimate reasons to do so. On the contrary, he says that he actually “loved the old man.”

Although he cites the “pale blue eye” of the old man, which “resembled that of a vulture,” as the reason behind his murder, this seems more like a meaningless justification than an actual motive.

All of that shows that the protagonist’s perception is constructed through his ill internal states of mind and not in line with objective reality. In the light of the Thomas Theorem, the protagonist’s definition of the threat of the “vulture eye” as real prompts his action to kill. His *imagined*, subjective fear of his victim’s eye (which seems otherwise to be harmless) propels his action to commit *real* murder, one that is born out of misconception and paranoid prediction.

“A plot device can be practically anything as long as whatever it is, it either gets the story moving or at the very least keeps it up” (Pfeil 267). The purpose of a plot device is to “set[] loose a bunch of other important events down the line” (Pfeil 267). In this sense, the self-fulfilling prophecy of the protagonist is an effective plot device that is embedded in the entire narrative. Prediction (obsession with the “vulture eye” and the need to eliminate it) is the starting point of the plot, whereas fulfillment (murder and confession) is the ultimate end.

Moreover, the tragic plot type of the story can be divided into several phases; those are “anticipation, dream, frustration, nightmare, destruction or death wish” (Amir 598). In the first phase of the narrative, the “anticipation stage,” the protagonist voices his resentment towards the old man’s eerie eye and his desire to dispose of it (Amir 598).

The “dream stage” comprises the “nights of spying . . . [followed by the] murder of the old man” (Amir 598). The “frustration stage” then begins with the arrival of the police shortly after the murder has been committed and the corpse has been concealed (Amir 598-599). The narrator’s plight here is exacerbated by the fact that the officers “suspect nothing” even though “the ringing in his ears keeps getting louder” (Amir 598-599).

The “nightmare stage” then unfolds, as the “ringing”—to which the policemen remain oblivious—becomes unbearable, and the protagonist begins to come undone (Amir 599). The last phase of the plot, “the destruction or death wish,” commences when the protagonist finally confesses his crime (Amir 599).

It should be noted here that since the story does not end with the death of the protagonist, the narrative, one may argue, slightly deviates from the conventional understanding of tragedy (Amir 599). Nevertheless, the final confession can be interpreted as a symbolic death or figurative self-destruction. In the Poean universe, “the police do not function as ministers of justice” (Broda 35). They rather function as a representation of “the criminal’s compulsion to admit his deed and to destroy himself” (Broda 35).

The above five phases of the course of events remain enveloped in a thematic self-fulfilling prophecy that permeates every part of the story. In the anticipation stage, the protagonist becomes obsessed with getting rid of the old man “vulture eye” without giving the reader a clear justification for that:

He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult . . . One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever . . . with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work! (4)

The protagonist here seems to be detached from reality. His interpretation of it is muddled and subjective. He convinces himself that the man’s eye is ominous and must be eliminated. Such paranoia is real to him, and accordingly, as per the Thomas Theorem, he is in real danger of the consequences. He thus plots with “caution” and “foresight” to commit the murder. This stage includes the first two parts and parts of the third part of the Poean self-

fulfilling prophecy formula: subjective misinterpretation, ominous prediction, and nagging obsession (planning).

In the dream stage, as cited previously, the protagonist stalks and eventually murders the old man:

I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it . . . I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man’s sleep . . . I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously . . . that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights . . . And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night . . . (emphasis is mine, 3-4)

The protagonist here describes how careful, “slow,” and “cautious” his plot is. Despite his clear madness, he still possesses enough perseverance to stalk the victim until the “deed [is] so far done” and the “old man [is] dead” (6). In this stage, one can trace the *continuation* of the nagging obsession (planning) part of the self-fulfilling prophecy formula in addition to the forth part, the wicked action (murder).

As the story advances, the remainder of the plot type stages (frustration, nightmare, destruction/death wish) unfold, as the protagonist conceals his murder, welcomes the police to his home, sets up their chairs over the burial place of the victim, and starts hearing the heartbeat of his victim echoing in his ears until he finally cracks under the pressure of guilt and “admits the deed,” asking the policemen to “tear up the planks” and uncover the body of the old man. The last part of the Poean self-fulfilling prophecy formula (the frantic confession/self-destruction) is stretched across over these parts of the narrative, signaling both the conclusion of the story and the fulfillment of the prophecy:

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” (8)

As said earlier, death and self-destruction in Poe’s stories are symbolic and so is the way they are brought about. The presence of the police does not necessarily allude to the enforcement of the law as much as it reflects the murderer’s disturbed inner state of mind which forces him to “admit his deed and . . . destroy himself” (Broda 35).

The entanglement between destruction and the prediction of it, on the one hand, and the protagonist’s helplessness and questionable sanity, on the other, is very characteristic of many of Poe’s tales— not only the present one. The use of self-fulfilling prophecies by Poe often seems to coincide with the establishment of a subversive balance.

In this regard, Hubert Zapf writes that “Poe’s texts characteristically stage the tensions between order and chaos, power and impotence, control and the loss of control” (65). Zapf clarifies that a Poean self-fulfilling prophecy is forceful and often antagonizes the “deliberate intentions of the subjects involved” (65). This coerciveness of the protagonist’s predictions is evident in the “Tell-Tale Heart”. It is traceable in his helplessness towards the harmless “vulture eye” and his inability to keep the murder unconfessed.

Poe’s use of the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy in this story as a plot device is aimed at propelling the narrative forward. Thus, the ominous prediction turns into the axle around which literary elements come together to achieve a perverse whole. The Poean self-fulfilling prophecy formula one encounters in this story (and other notable ones as well) seems to follow a relatively simple pattern: subjective misinterpretation → ominous prediction → nagging obsession (planning) → wicked action (murder) → frantic confession (self-destruction). The true genius of Poe lies in the fact that he delivers on his promise. He opens “The Tell-Tale Heart” with the words “TRUE! —nervous” and leaves the reader by the end of it “very, very dreadfully nervous.”

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