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“ The Birth-Mark” and “ The Cask of Amontillado” – A comparative study

Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne are two important contributors of the nineteenth-century American literature. Edgar Allan Poe was one of the most celebrated authors, posthumously though, of the past century. Some of his stories are almost autobiographical, and though he lived in a previous era, his ideas were far ahead of his time. Nathaniel Hawthorne is an author, whose works are even today cited for seeking ethical guidance. His stories urge the reader to analyze his moral confusions. This essay is an attempt to compare and contrast the styles of these two great authors by scrutinizing their famous short stories - “ The Birth-Mark” and “ The Cask of Amontillado”. The central theme of both the stories under our discussion is the terror arising out of the complexities of human relations. Despite having superficial similarities, like the eerie and suspense-filled nature of the settings, Poe and Hawthorne have pursued a unique approach in highlighting the theme of darkness of the human soul.

Poe and Hawthorne are known to have similar ways of portraying dark themes in their works. Both these great authors were fascinated by the human mind and its dark secrets. They believed in shocking the readers through grotesque portrayal of human nature, rather than mild connotations about the fragility of human relations. Suspense was their main tool and fear was their greatest weapon. They did not sweet coat their characters to make them more desirable, instead presented the ugly side of them. This style of the authors is exemplified in the short stories “ The Birth-Mark” and “ The

Cask of Amontillado.”

‘ Birth-mark’ deals with human imperfection and ‘ The Cask of Amontillado’ deals with revenge. Both the stories are examples of the psychological literature spawned during the romantic era. During a period, when arts took the help of supernatural elements, these authors used investigation of the human mind to create terror. Hawthorne deals with how obsessive pursuit of eradicating a mark in a woman’s body leads to her death. The husband becomes so embroiled in finding a solution to make his wife flawless that he willfully puts their relationship and her life in danger.

Poe’s story tells about how a man extracts revenge in a cold blooded and calculative manner, and feels little or no remorse for his deeds. A person is condemned for an act, which took place long ago, and he is locked in a cellar, left to die. The fact that the man is forced to contemplate his imminent death in isolation and darkness accentuates the horror in a manner that even supernatural elements could not achieve.

Both Poe and Hawthorne use gothic elements to build up the tension of impending gloom. They use imagery, characterization and settings, to portray fear and death. The narrative is filled with an eerie tension and a build up that culminates in death. Hawthorne is an expert in delving into the deepest recess of human nature. One of the important themes dealt in both the stories is the human obsession, which could lead to destructible results. Both authors have used suspense and imagery to delineate the darkness of the human obsession. The stories each have two main characters and all of them fall under two broad categories- perpetrator and victim. An obsession of one character leads to the death of the other. Poe’s Fortunato becomes a

victim of Montresor's obsession with revenge, and Hawthorne's Georgiana is a victim of her husband's obsession with perfection. They have made use of foreshadowing and dialogues to evoke fear and terror on the victims' death.

"The deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana's heart; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away."

Though both these stories highlight the hidden darkness in man's soul by evoking a sense of death and fear, the writers have used two different themes namely the male dominance and dark revenge, as tools to emphasize the message about the evil within self. Hawthorne grew up in an America, which was undergoing a profound disequilibrium in terms of liberty and equality. The social groups which were affected by this disparity include Native Americans, Blacks and women. His stories, such as 'the Scarlet letter', reveal the patriarchal structure of the society during those times. In 'The birth-mark', a man tries to perfect his wife and in the process destroys her. Aylmer projects all his dissatisfactions with earthy frailties into Georgiana's cheek mark and makes her loathe it too.

"In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object."

Though Aylmer intensely loves Georgiana, he almost violently hates the birthmark in her cheek. He makes her accept that the mark should be removed and the experiment results in her death. This story is a critical commentary on the social institutions that projects a woman's body as pathological.

Poe's Montresor is an epitome of a deluded rationalist, who cannot comprehend the moral implications of his planned folly. He plans a revenge on Fortunato, who has performed an unspecified act of injustice against him, and coaxes him to follow him to the cellar. There he leaves him alone, to be locked in cold and isolation, and anticipate his murder, thus seeking revenge.

Fortunato, the victim, has no idea why this misfortune befell on him. He says "it must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will." This story is about a person who loses his humanity, because of his mindless and obsessive desire to avenge himself on Fortunato. Poe chooses every dialogue of the narrative carefully and keeps his reader in suspense until the story boils down to the horrific ending.

In their own way, both Hawthorne and Poe present the death of a character in the final stages of their story. Hawthorne's work can be considered a parable, with explicit connotations to original sin strewn all over the story, whereas, Poe's story deals more with the human psyche. Both of them make use of dark imagery, like the Catacombs described in detail by Poe, and the cold look Aylmer gives to his wife's cheek in 'The Birth-mark.' While Hawthorne's story is a reminder about the mortality of the human soul and educates its reader that nothing is perfect in this world, Poe's story delineates the dark side of human obsessions.

There is a striking similarity in between the stories in the way they use horror and death to convey their themes. They also have similar elements of foreshadowing, suspense, grotesque characters, portrayal of obsession, and

death in the climax. Both the stories and their characters are plagued by dark human emotions like hate, guilt, fear, sin, and isolation. However, they stylistically differ in the way the authors render their story.

Though both the writers portray the evil side of their characters (the murderous, the abusive, the guilt-ridden), their approaches are evidently different. The moral in the stories of Hawthorne are easily visible, and he has even risked criticism that he missed art for the sake of teaching morals. Poe, on the other hand, places emphasis on art rather than the message it conveys. He allows the readers to extract the meaning from his work without explicitly stating them.

Hawthorne's protagonist by playing God and trying to eradicate his wife's 'defect' ended in destroying the love of his life. The story is a parable and confronts the puritan beliefs of his time. Poe's work does not deal with religious affairs but is a psychological study of darkness of the human heart. Poe's work is rendered in a first person narrative so that the reader has an in-depth view of the narrator's emotions and deeds. Hawthorne's story is more of a religious commentary about imperfection and mortality of human existence, and Poe's is a psychological scrutiny of obsessive and mindless human pursuits.

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