

Doppelgängers revealing personal duality



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A recurring plot point in Edgar Allan Poe's short horror stories, doppelgängers allow Poe to delve deep into characters' consciences, enabling the reader to grasp the contrasting duality of human nature. This theme appears in Poe's "William Wilson" providing suspense and thrilling plot twists for a memorable ending. A popular literary technique, doppelgängers appear most often in Gothic literature. Based on a compound German word, "doppelgänger" can be literally translated to mean "double-goer." A fitting translation, "double-goer" properly describes the character to which a doppelgänger refers. Defined as either "a ghostly counterpart of a living person" or a "double, alter ego, a person who has the same name as another," doppelgängers basically describe extremely similar characters who have a very strong personal connection, whether they are related, or just happen to share the same name ("doppelgänger"). In Poe's short story, "William Wilson," the narrator, who calls himself William Wilson, meets his namesake, when another William Wilson arrives at Dr. Bransby's Academy. Immediately, his doppelgänger affects Wilson's mental wellbeing. Wilson's doppelgänger follows him throughout the world, foiling his attempts at trickery. Following several build-ups of passionate hatred, Wilson's displeasure overflows, and he tries to defeat his namesake, but both times, he cannot complete the act he intended because of a shocking realization. A true doppelgänger, William Wilson's namesake possesses several traits exactly like those of Wilson. First, of course, "although no relation," they possess the same name. At first, Wilson attempts to write this off as a coincidence, calling the shared name "one of those every-day appellations which seem, by perspective right, to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob" in order to assign less value to the fact that

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they have the same name (Poe 243). Another “mere accident,” Wilson and his namesake arrive at the school on the same day, setting “afloat the notion that [they] were brothers” (245). Surprisingly, had this same-named stranger been his brother, he and Wilson would have been twins; Wilson learns that they also share a birthday, along with the author: “the nineteenth of January, 1813” (245). Wilson also discovers that his doppelgänger are “of the same height” and “even singularly alike in general contour of person and outline of feature,” furthering the belief that they could be twins (246). After realizing all the similarities that cannot be helped, the doppelgänger takes the imitation further, purposefully mimicking his style of dress. With practice, the doppelgänger manages to copy Wilson’s voice, but the doppelgänger has a “constitutional defect” which prohibits him from speaking audibly (247). The doppelgänger can only manage to whisper, but “his singular whisper” slowly becomes “the very echo” of Wilson’s voice (247). Despite these glowing similarities, Wilson finds “no reason to believe that...this similarity had ever been made a subject of comment, or even observed at all by our schoolfellows” (247). With all these disturbing similarities, Wilson confesses “nothing could more seriously disturb [him]...than any allusion to a similarity of mind, person, or condition existing between [them]” and develops feelings of disgust and vexation. Truthfully, however, the original William Wilson is “aggressive, witty, and imperious,” while his namesake presents himself as “Quiet, gentle, and wise—but unthreatened” (Warner 1). Following Wilson’s opinion of him, the doppelgänger maintains a detrimental hold on Wilson. A cunning prankster, Wilson often attempts to pull pranks on his fellow classmates, until his doppelgänger arrives. His namesake’s “constant thwarting” of his schemes

“ sparks a slowly smoldering hatred in Wilson” (“ There are Two Sides to Every Poe” 1). In an attempt to punish his doppelgänger, Wilson intends to play a prank on him. Sneaking into his bedroom late at night, Wilson pulls back the drapes around the bed, but cannot bring himself to carry out his plan, because the face he sees in the bed is his own. To escape this terrifying sight, Wilson flees the Academy for Eton College. With newfound control over his doppelgänger, William Wilson quickly reverts to his old ways. In a “ moment of intoxicated weakness and depravity,” the doppelgänger returns, announcing his return by whispering the shared name into Wilson’s ear (1). Once again, this confrontation sends Wilson running away to Oxford University. While at Oxford, Wilson predictably continues with his “ hedonistic antics” when he attempts to “ cheat a nobleman, Lord Glendinning, at cards” (1). Suddenly, the intruding doppelgänger reveals Wilson’s scheme, saying he is “ fulfilling a duty” (Poe 256). This opinion of his deed reveals the doppelgänger’s true form and purpose in Wilson’s life. Serving as an external view of Wilson’s conscience, the doppelgänger allows an internal conflict within William Wilson to exist in true sight. Clearly, Wilson and his namesake represent the duality of human nature. As Wilson portrays himself through his scheming true self and his appropriate doppelgänger, so people often face internal conflicts with either side of themselves. For example, the temptation to cheat on a test may entice the overwhelmed side of a student, but the desire to maintain a certain level of integrity inspires the honest side of the same student. Poe introduces the doppelgänger to appropriately show William Wilson’s internal conflict externally. Facing “ a conflict of conscience—doing good versus doing evil,” William Wilson truly fights his conscience when he battles against his doppelgänger (Coulahan 2).

Unfortunately, Wilson realizes his true connection to his doppelgänger too late. The final straw, Wilson's doppelgänger arrives at a masquerade party and foils Wilson's attempt at seducing a beautiful married woman. Upon hearing the "ever-remembered, low, damnable whisper" in his ear, Wilson breaks into a "[f]renzy of wrath" towards his doppelgänger (Poe 260). Engaged in a swordfight, the doppelgänger seems unwilling to partake in the confrontation for the obvious reason that there can be no winner when someone fights with himself. In an absolute rage, Wilson stabs his namesake repeatedly through the chest. To "prevent an intrusion," Wilson turns away from his doppelgänger for a split second, but when he "immediately return[s] to [his] dying antagonist," he sees instead a large mirror (261). In the mirror, Wilson witnesses his "own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood," indicating that by killing his doppelgänger, he has actually killed himself. Confirming this, the doppelgänger reiterates that by murdering him, Wilson has murdered himself. Indeed, killing one's conscience ultimately leads to death, whether physical or emotional. By ignoring the morals engraved into their characters, people undermine the moral fiber that keeps society running in an orderly fashion. As Wilson ignores his doppelgänger in attempts to cheat in cards and seduce a married woman, he harms not only himself but also those his schemes are directed at. Similarly, the duality of human beings keeps both sides in check, allowing the conscience to dictate moral behavior. Poe uses the common literary technique, doppelgängers, to portray the common theme of duality of human nature. Serving as the good side, the doppelgänger in "William Wilson" provided a loathed contrast to the evil William Wilson. By incorporating doppelgängers as a literary technique, Edgar Allan Poe

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externalizes an internal conflict in several stories, including “ William Wilson.” Works Cited Coulahan, Jack. “ William Wilson.” Literature, Arts, and Medicine Database. 19 Dec. 2001. New York University. 7 Sept. 2008. “ doppelganger.” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2008. Merriam-Webster Online. 7 September 2008Poe, Edgar A. Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe. New York: HarperCollins, 1970. “ There are Two Sides to Every Poe.” Shyspeak. net. 3 June 2006. 7 Sept. 2008. Warner, C. S. “ Doppelgängers in Poe’s William Wilson and the Movie, Fight Club.” Associated Content. 8 Aug. 2007. Associated Content. 7 Sept. 2008.