

A Comparative Reading of Kafka and Edgar Allen Poe

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ABSTRACT: Franz Kafka and Edgar Allen Poe are some of the famous writers who employed different approaches to engage their chosen audiences. From a postmodernist perspective, both Franz Kafka and Edgar Allen Poe are regarded as (de)constructors of existing style of the short story genre. However, what is most interesting is that both of them have employed similar tactics of sacrificing their characters at the conclusion of their stories. In the short story *The Metamorphosis* the insect like protagonist and in “The Black Cat” the death of the cat are parallel examples of the approaches that the two famous authors employ to portray the evil and nightmarish life that the world presents. In essence, both Kafka and Poe appear fascinated with the un-sensational story telling that uses the ultimate demise of the characters as proof that the world is full of untold evil. While either of the two have unique approaches to their writing, what is evident is that they exploit the choice of words, sentence structure, and writing style to question the fate of the protagonists in their stories. This paper examines Franz Kafka and Edgar Allen Poe’s writing from a comparative perspective.

KEYWORDS: Capitalism, Distortion, Existentialism, Gothic, Memory, Postmodernism, Sacrifice, Salvation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The point of view is essential to any story since it creates the setting and mood of the literary piece. In the same way, the characters and the narration play a critical role in a given story. For this reason, authors employ varying narration styles to gain the attention of the readers. In this regard, every author has his or her personal style in accomplishing this feat. In essence, an analysis of style and narration of both Edgar Allen Poe and Franz Kafka reveals two diametrically opposite writers because their styles differ fundamentally. Inasmuch as they handle similar topics of discourse, it is evident that their approaches to distortion, sacrifice, and salvation are quite different and this helps to show the dissimilarities between the two accomplished authors.

In essence, Edgar Allen Poe is famous for writing suspense and horror stories. This 19th Century writer strategically uses menacing and brooding tones by using dark and intricate language. An examination of his works shows the author prefers the constant threat of death and suffering. In addition, he favours the use of gothic genres to get his audience captivated. As mentioned earlier, one of Poe’s aspects of writing is the language he elects to use. On the other hand, there is little doubt that Franz Kafka is one of the most important authors of the 20th century. His writing style has had such an essential impact, which led to his style being christened Kafkaesque; his writing style is unique in that it is essentially surreal. For instance, most of his works are a study in the strange; they are the embodiment for the absurdity that manifests in life. For example, he takes pride in shedding light into the psychology of his characters and explores their thinking and imagination. Apparently, he has the uncanny ability to play with metaphors because his expressions are essentially metaphorical in nature (Bajohr, Dorvel, and Weitz 69). For this reason, Kafka’s writing embodies distortion, sacrifice, and salvation from a unique approach.

International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization)

Vol. 5, Issue 7, July 2016

II. RELATED WORKS

The choices of words that Poe uses in his writings are quite difficult and haunting at most. For instance, in the short story *Ligeia*, he describes the grandeur of a building as gloomy and dreary. He further describes the aspect of the domain as savage due to the sadness of the time-honoured memories, and that the location of the scene as being in the most remote and unsocial region of the country (Poe). In reality, it is evident that the choice of words is designed to create a feeling of melancholy and apprehension in the minds of the readers. On the contrary, it is manifest that the distortions and self-sacrifice are evident in some of his writings. For instance, in the “Complete Tales and Poems” by the same author, he describes the physical distortion of the identity of a character called Berenice. Poe admits that disorder was one of his biggest weaknesses. However, he managed to identify the shocking changes that were evident in Berenice. Incidentally, the author admits that he married early. However, it is apparent that he was not committed to the marriage. For instance, in “The Black Cat,” he confesses, “There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man (Poe). Hence, his personal demeanour had a significant effect on his writings and dealings with the people he purported to love.

On the other hand, it is notable that most of Kafka’s works were published posthumously (France 330). For this reason, it is important to examine his life, thoughts, and beliefs for one to have an understanding of his works. Notably, his family life reflects in his unique writing style. In the same way, the same nature of Kafka’s prose enables interpretations from various perspectives. Incidentally, some critics place his works in different schools of literature. For instance, some critics assumed he was commenting on capitalism while others contended he was distorting the established reality. The absurdity and hopelessness inherent in his works are regarded as illustrative of existentialism. On the other hand, the expressionist movement manifestly influences some of his books; however, it is clear that some of his books were associated with the experimental modernist genre.

Similarly, Kafka emerges as a writer who was sentimental about the topics his works covered. He appears to write in a style that uses fictional words. For instance, one of his characters turns into an insect but attempts to maintain his daily routine. In another case, *The Trial* handles the misfortune of a man who is arrested and tried for a crime he did not commit. In essence, his writing style shows a man who preferred visionary fiction; he also appears to address an audience that was far beyond his time. Additionally, he was alienated from the society because of his parents’ religious practice and little social formality in the conservative Jewish society. It is apparent that the alienation affected the writer, which made him to deride the society in which he lived.

III. STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Contrarily, Poe manages to create entire stories by using disquieting words that leave a lasting impression in the memory of the readers. Similarly, the author prefers to use commas and dashes to allow him to expand his thoughts beyond what a normal sentence would allow. It is notable that the majority of his writings convey an idea of a revolution. In the same way, the author often goes through some sort of mental breakdown; therefore, an examination of Poe’s inner thoughts is necessary. Similarly, the use of commas in his writings is essential because it creates suspense, which is an important aspect of horror stories. However, by slowing down his dialogue by the use of incessant commas, the reader is left hanging as he or she anticipates what is to come.

There is little doubt that Kafka’s writing had an unmatched versatile vitality; in essence, it was almost natural for Kafka to present to his readers nearly impossible situations. For instance, he could highlight a situation where an individual turns into an insect. From such a starting point, he could develop the story with extreme attention to detail and magic realism. In essence, his writings transcended different genres, such as when he imagined his body makes movements around the world while his writing self-remained imbedded behind in the unlikely form of a beetle. However, the image changed drastically when he penned “The Judgment” in one seating.

Inversely, a certain aspect of Poe’s writing is disturbing. For instance, most of his stories are recounts of death; furthermore, it is notable that most of his victims are female. Additionally, Poe has numerous instances of reanimation of the dead. For instance, in the “Fall of the House of Usher”, Madeline is made to come back from death. Similarly, the narrator makes readers believe that he could hear the heartbeat of the dead man underneath the floorboards. In

International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

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Vol. 5, Issue 7, July 2016

essence, Allen Poe comes out as one of the most innovative and mysterious writers of his time. The author has an uncanny ability to expose his readers' worst nightmares despite their carefully structured lives.

As noted earlier, one of Poe's greatest talents is his ability to paint gloomy pictures in the minds of his readers. It is apparent that the use of gloomy pictures is designed to enable the readers to make the connection between death and darkness. For instance, the setting in the "Pit and the Pendulum" is originally pitch-black. As the story progresses, readers begin to notice how the original setting played a crucial role in the many ways the narrator discovers death. Inasmuch as the narrator has to rely on his instincts to find out his fate, it is notable that he knows that death awaits him in the darkness.

Literary commentators often allege that Kafka's posthumous novel titled "The Castle" tells the story of the protagonist's search for salvation. The book's interpretive and aesthetic complexity gives an insight into Kafka's writing; in addition, the book gives a rare glimpse into the multi-layered denotation of salvation.

Understandably, Kafka was a German-speaking Jew and a non-Christian (Panichas 1); for this reason, it is possible he had a faint understanding of salvation. Therefore, in "The Castle" the protagonist does not come out as a man seeking redemption. His aspirations cannot be understood to be soteriological in nature; on the contrary, the character comes out as one of the compositions of Kafka that were designed to evoke complexity.

There is sufficient proof that Poe is one of the most intriguing writers of horror stories. It is apparent his conscience leads to this creepy ambition; the writer shows his struggles, hardships, and tragedies that he aptly portrays in his poems and stories. However, the writer shows that he is more than the manic depression lunatic that readers think he is. While most of his stories entail something creepy, the protagonist usually ends up doing quite outrageous things. It is also noticeable that Poe employs his personal experiences in most of his stories. These experiences play an important role in his approach to writing. For example, in "The Black Cat" the writer notes, "I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, 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" (Poe). From this narrative, it is apparent that he writes from his experiences.

On the other hand, it is evident that Poe's stories were a reflection of his life. The fact that he lost the love of his life could have influenced his writings profoundly. He had married a girl named Virginia because he knew she was the best for him (Poe, and Barger 93). Consequently, the loss made him see the futility of life, which he aptly represented in his poems and other writings. The unique but gloomy writing style suited him the most because it enabled him to talk about some of his saddest experiences. Each one of the writer's works has someone being killed. For example, in the "The Tale-Tale Heart," the narrator turns out to be the murderer while in "Annabel Lee," the speaker turns to be the victim. For instance, the old man's abnormal eye frightens the narrator. After observing the elder for seven days, he decides to kill him. While each of the stories' murderers is different, they all end up with a sense of guilt.

Another gory relationship in Poe's works is evident in the "Black Cat." He has a special relationship with the cat, but the situation soon changes when he turns against the pet. In one scene, Poe shows hatred for the cat, turns to his wife, and then stabs the pet in the eye. In another scene, he kills his wife in a bid to kill the cat. Such scenes make readers wonder the driving force behind the insanity displayed by the narrator. In essence, in most of the scenes, the narrators show extreme violence against their victims, have no doubts, second thoughts, or hesitations. Incidentally, actions like the ones described above are an indication of the troubled life that Poe lived. The distortions about his writing, the sacrifices that other people had to make to accommodate his life, and the salvation that he eventually gained is all manifest in his many writings.

It is evident that Poe eventually became a master of the short story. He had a gift to design interesting plots and twisted narrative styles. He also had a distinctive dark way of telling his stories. In essence, he has a psychological intensity that makes his stories memorable. The tales of extreme horror that characterize most of his writings attest to his writing style. In essence, his writing style was fundamentally different from that of Franz Kafka, which this paper will examine next. However, it is notable that Kafka once wrote in his diary of the need to seek a total opening of the soul and the body. For instance, it is evident that he was deeply disappointed by the imperfections that manifested in the society. He alluded that writing should spring from within the same way as giving birth. He alleges that when a child is born, he or she is covered in mucus; as such, the insect was no longer beautiful because it was completely removed from the rest of the world. Unmistakably, he sought to portray the same image when he wrote *The Metamorphosis*. In the same way, Kafka appears to fancy writing strange fictional space where the characters try to make some sense out of the

International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

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frightening world in which they live. His writing style appears straightforward; however, his works tend to depict and describe the irrationality of life and multitude philosophy.

It is notable that the book *The Metamorphosis* is one of Kafka's most important works. In essence, the book shows some of the difficulties of modern life and the constant struggle for acceptance. Some of the difficult moments the writer faced influenced his perception of distortion, sacrifice, and salvation. In the book, Kafka uses many examples to show his imaginations and musings about self-extinction (Kafka, and Guttman 23). The fascinations with suffering and slow death are manifest in the book. In the same publication, one can make a comparison between the Samsa family (the protagonist's family) and that of Kafka.

Incidentally, one cannot comprehend Kafka's story with a single reading; on the contrary, one requires re-reading to make out the deeper meaning that Kafka intends to portray. His choice of words and sentence structure are expertly used to make complex and impersonal stories. Incidentally, a number of Kafka's writings are important for examining his view of modernity. For instance, "The Castle," "The Trial," and "Amerika" give an important view of a spiritual picturesque. The above books serve as a shocking portrayal of the ills that confront modern societies; evidently, the author seems to criticize the meaning of humanity, the destiny of the human race, and salvation. The writer appears to seek answers to some of the complex issues that human beings have to confront. For example, vital measure, unity, and purpose are some of the goals that human beings must seek to achieve.

It is clear that the author created fictional words in which characters attempt to make sense of a world full of nightmares. The writing style might appear straightforward and simple. However, a critical analysis shows Kafka is fascinated with philosophizing about how absurd the world could be. When exploring distortion, sacrifice, and salvation, Kafka appears to use deadpan language. This style is manifest in "The Castle" and the "The Trial." In these books, the author criticizes the bureaucratic procedures of his time; for this reason, it is arguable that the writer adopts the language of bureaucracy to achieve a certain goal. For instance, in "Amerika", which was later rendered as "The Man Who Disappeared," the author writes, "As the seventeen-year-old Karl Rossmann, who had been sent to America by his poor parents because a servant-girl had seduced him and had a child by him, entered New York Harbour in the already slowing ship, he saw the statue of the Goddess of Liberty, which he had been observing for some time, as though in a sudden blaze of sunlight" (Kafka, and Robertson 1).

In the above quotation, a reader might assume that the sentence carries the reader to the exact point that the writer wants to portray. For instance, the authors seem to give information sufficient to understand Rossmann's situation. However, after assimilating the information that the authors have crammed into the sentence, one might have to take another perspective. For example, one gets to learn that Rossmann has been sent far across the world not because he is guilty of any crime but rather because he is the victim of a vicious crime. However, it is worth noting that Kafka wrote in a version of German that had limited vocabulary. However, he still used a version of the language that showed how steeped in German literature he was.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both Franz Kafka and Edgar Allen Poe had different approaches to their writing and understanding of distortion, sacrifice, and salvation. In essence, Edgar Allen Poe was fascinated with death and suffering; as such, he used his books and poems to enable readers to make the connection between the dark world in which they lived and imminent death. His books portray a writer's content on informing readers of the inevitability of suffering and consequent death. On the other hand, Franz Kafka was captivated by the use of fictional words to deride an unfair society. An examination of the two writers' works reveal authors who understood the essence of capturing the imagination of the words. Their choice of words and writing styles reveal authors who understood the essence of captivating the audience. Kafka was obsessed with the unfair world that victimized the weak and the most vulnerable. The victims of society's brutality were often left feeling disoriented and hopeless. Nevertheless, their writing approaches show writers who understand distortion, sacrifice, and salvation as important aspects that humanity must confront.

International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization)

Vol. 5, Issue 7, July 2016

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