



The portrayal of the Theme of Guilt and search for Redemption in “*The tell- tale heart*” and “*The black cat*”

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Abstract— *The paper deals with the Theme of Guilt and the search for Redemption. Throughout the short stories “The Black cat” and “The Tell -Tale Heart”, both the narrator demonstrates their Guilt of Murder. They are obsessed with unusual things like the black cat and the old man’s evil eye. This shows that both the characters have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Poe tells the readers that no one can escape from the guilt. In the short stories, they feel extreme guilt and they justify themselves by repenting towards the sin that they have committed. The guilt that is tormenting the narrators can be justified by two perspectives of guilt, one is guilt as a moral emotion and the other is, as a social emotion.*

Keywords— *Guilt, Murder, OCD, Crime, Obsession.*



Nothing is more wretched than the mind of a man conscious of guilt.

Plautus

Guilt is a social emotion just like any other emotions like anger, fear, joy, sadness and so on but there is a difference between bodily emotions and social or conditioned emotion. Bodily emotions are transmitted through hormones and neurotransmitters with the help of our brain but Guilt is something that affects us from external forces like society.

Social emotions are the emotions that occur to us in the form of thoughts, ideas and the actions of other people. Many people think that guilt is any other feeling and that it just arises from one’s inner self and we feel it but guilt is a feeling that is created in certain ways of thinking based on old fashioned ideas or moral rules created by people. Feeling guilty is difficult to endure and it does not go away easily as we think. After committing a crime, people feel guilty; if one doesn't feel guilty, he is a sociopath. Guilt is an embarrassment or shame.

Guilt is a self- conscious emotion. Guilt never leaves until you confront it. One should redeem their feeling

of guilt. Guilt is something filled in one's mind with the feeling of being responsible or regretful for a crime or an offence. Guilt is a state where our mind fights against our mind. It's the conflict with you. Guilt is important in our lives. It teaches us what to do and what not to do. That is why Guilt is a moral emotion.

Guilt is an overriding feeling that kills your inner peace. With guilt every step feels heavy and every action seems to add to it. It is that pleasure which seems evil but inducing that adds to the pile of undeniable pain. It cannot be expressed due to just one specific reason; it might be caused by even millions of small reasons which affect your conscience more than anything else. It is a feeling that makes you numb to every other positive feeling that you could feel to make yourself happy. It is triggered by your subconscious when something terrible happens and the cause is your dear self. Guilt often leads to self-hate. It is one of the strongest emotions.

“*The Tell- Tale Heart*” is a horror genre and it is a short story with mysteries and Goth. It was published by James Russell Lowell in ‘*The Pioneer*’ in 1843. “*The Tell - Tale Heart*”, the narrator begins the story with a sense of guilt, the narrator claims that he is anxious but not in any

way, he is insane. The narrator says that he is going to narrate a story, in the story he claims he will defend his sane behaviour yet confessing about murdering an old man. He is not driven by any temptation of desire or greed, but it is the fear of the old man's pale blue eye. He insists again and again that he is not an insane character but rather he is a sane person by showing his relaxed and measured actions, though it is a crime. His relaxed and measured actions are not a madman's say, the narrator. Every single night for seven days, he visits the old man's apartment and he covertly observes the old man who is sleeping in the bed.

In the morning, the narrator behaves like nothing had happened and everything surrounding them was just normal. On the eighth day, the narrator plans on killing the old man, after secretly observing the old man. On the eighth day, the narrator slowly creaks onto the old man's room, just a small noise from the cracking on the wooden floor that made the old man awake and the old man cries out loud asking who is there with him in that room.

The old man is frightened and sits awake in his bed. The protagonist understood the fact that how petrified the old man looks and he knows how lonely the old man is but still his obsession with the old man's eye grew even more. And soon the protagonist hears a loud noise, it's a pounding heartbeat. At first, the heartbeat was dull but later on. It started beating faster and faster and the protagonist was terrified that the neighbours would hear the sound of his pounding heartbeat. So, he attacks and finally kills him and he mutilates the body and hides the body parts under the floorboards in the old man's bedroom. He carefully cleans up the blood in the floor without a trace. After completely bleaching his floor, the clock strikes four. At the same hour, he hears the knock on his door. The police officers are at his door because of the complaint about the old man's shriek made by the neighbours.

The narrator is purposely chatty and distracting the police officers and trying his best to appear normal. He shows around the house and at his height of boldness, he even calls the police officers to sit and chat with him at the old man's bedroom. He is comfortable until he hears a loud thumping sound of a heartbeat under the floorboards. The slow and dull noise is getting louder and louder. The guilt and anxiety are expressed through his words, "Yes! Yes, I killed him. Pull the boards and you shall see! I killed him. But why does his heart not stop beating?!"

Why does it not stop!?. [pg.no:67]

At some point he panics, assuming that the police officers are also hearing this dull faint noise of the old man's heartbeat and he thinks that the policemen knew and is still chatting with him as a sign of mockery, feeling guilty, he tells the police officers about the crime he has committed.

He confesses everything about the murder and shrieks at the police officers to rip open the floorboard.

"*The Tell -Tale Heart*" by Edgar Allan Poe is a gothic and sad short story. It was written in the genre of horror. It shows how a man murdered another man without a sense of remorse in his mind and was hit by the reality of his crime and tormented by his guilt, he confessed his crime. "*The Tell -Tale Heart*" is one of the shortest stories of Edgar Allan Poe's study of mental decline and paranoia, which is being obsessed by unusual things.

Poe fills in the story with the obsession and he heightens the murder sequences. Poe also sheds some light on the narrator's obsession with the old man's eye and the old man's heartbeat and how the narrator claims that he is a sane character throughout the story. The beating of the old man's heart also symbolizes the paranoia and his plot to reveal the narrator's evil game.

"*The Tell- Tale Heart*" is a study of paranoia and it is the study of psychological conflict within our mind. At the beginning of the story the narrator admits that he is anxious and claims that is not at all mad. His self defence against insanity shows how he thinks of himself and how he feels the sense of guilt making him go insane. And also in "*The House of Usher*" we can see that same anxious character Roderick Usher admits that he is going insane to his friend but in

"*The Tell -Tale Heart*" the narrator thinks of his hypersensitivity as evidence to his sanity, not as a sign of insanity.

Another conflict in the story is the narrator's position between love and hate. Here we can see that Poe explores the contradiction of a human mind. He states that sometimes in our life, we hurt people who we love the most. The narrator loved the old man, he did not murder the old man because of greed or for any vengeance. The narrator is so obsessed with evil eye, he wants to separate the eye from the old man but the protagonist of the story can't see that the eye in the old man is 'I' to the old man. Poe states that "His eye was like the eye of a vulture" [pg.no:64]

The narrator does not wish to kill the old man, he just wants the evil eye to be separated from the old man but he forgets to see that the eye is 'I' to the old man. The narrator kills the old man for his obsession with the evil eye. He sees the eyes as evil eyes and he forgets to see the old man as his loved one and the narrator is competent enough to murder him while maintaining his love for the old man. His obsession towards the old man's evil eye ends up killing the old man altogether. He starts mutilating the old man, this shows he has no humanity left in him. This movement of mutilation is stored deep in his mind. It started haunting him. He sees that the old man's heart is still pounding and

he is going to get caught for his crime. This shows how guilt can turn against one's own mind.

The narrator is hypersensitive to the sounds, the anxiety and fear made him sensitive to the sounds. He is tormented between the real and imaginary world. He can't distinguish between what's real and what's not, he hears the pounding of the heartbeat under the wooden floorboard.

In this short story Poe talks about the depth of a human mind. How it can destroy us.

Our mind can be a holy place where angels live in harmony and sometimes it can be a devil's workplace where angels are buried. The narrator in "*The Tell -Tale Heart*" gave him away to the police officers because his guilt and paranoia swept into his mind like cancer. More he pretends, the more he gets tormented by guilt. Finally confessing his crime of murder and he can't distinguish between the real world and imaginary world and tormented by his guilt forever.

In "*The Tell -Tale Heart*", the protagonist and the antagonist are one and the same. It represents that the narrator is the hero and the villain of his own life. The narrator is tormented by his guilt by subconsciously hearing the dead man's heartbeat and hides away his evidence so that he would never get caught by the police officers. Ultimately, he gets caught by his own self loathing guilt and confessing to the murder that he has committed.

The guilt is something that no one escapes from, the narrator feels so overwhelmed by his guilt he couldn't stand any longer and confesses to his crime. The louder the heartbeat gets and the louder the guilt gets to him in his mind. None can escape guilt, mainly the guilt of killing a person. Even if he loved the old man still, he gave in to the temptation of getting rid of the eyes. At the beginning of the story the narrator says that he is sane and not mad, he blames it on the old man's eyes. When you have committed a murder then the Guilt is inevitable.

"*The Tell- Tale Heart*", the moral message given by Edgar Allan Poe is that when one commits crime of murder, his own sense of guilt will expose him to the outer world.

"*The Black Cat*" is a short story crafted by Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's works are considered gothic and are filled with mystery. "*The Black Cat*" was published in 1843 in 'The Saturday Evening post'.

In "*The Black Cat*" the short story begins with the narrator claiming he was sane on the evening of his death. The story begins with a sense of mystery, the narrator claims he is an honest man and so honourable that everybody loves him. He says that he is an animal lover; he loves his cats and dogs. The narrator got married at every young age and he introduced his wife to his domestic life with his pets.

Among many of his pets like the birds, rabbits, dogs, a goldfish and a monkey, there is one he loves the most is a very large black cat named Pluto. Pluto was his favourite of them all. "TOMORROW I DIE. TOMORROW I die, and today I want to tell the world what happened and thus perhaps free my soul from the horrible weight which lies upon it."

"The Black Cat" [pg.no:34]

The narrator is influenced by alcoholism and he suffers from violent behavioural changes. He suffers from uncontrollable rage; he beats up his wife and the other animals except Pluto. One night because of his anger, he kills his beloved cat named Pluto. He can't bear the thought of his beloved cat biting him. He felt betrayed so he cut out his cat's eye with a penknife. He hangs the cat and in the morning he actually feels really bad. The same night his house burns down and he loses all his fortunes and possessions. And then he is haunted by Pluto, he sees the same black cat but with a mark on his neck. He drives the narrator even more insane. "The morning after I brought it home, however, I discovered that this cat, like Pluto, had only one eye." [pg.no:36]

At first the cat behaves well and later his cat starts acting strange. That's what the narrator thinks because he the cat resembles more like Pluto, he is tormented by the guilt of killing his beloved cat. One day in the cellar trips over because of the cat, an enraged narrator took the axe. The wife defends the cat so he takes the axe and buries it in his wife's neck. He covered everything up, he took the body of his wife and buried it in the wall behind the plaster. Finally after four days the police officers found out the narrator killed his wife. Though the narrator acted cool and confident after committing a crime, His guilt made him confess and he is tormented by his own guilt.

Poe's main concept is to focus on how guilt can affect a person's life. "*The Black Cat*" is also based on this concept. The narrator is tormented by his guilt because his actions caused his own life. We can see that he didn't realize that guilt is bothering him but slowly he realizes that the guilt is manifesting on him subconsciously.

In "*The Black Cat*", the narrator sees the black cat in a noose of the ruined remains of the burned house and we can see that he also knocks down the exact part of the wall where his wife was buried, this shows how guilt affects his subconscious mind. The narrator feels guilty about the crimes he had committed. If he doesn't feel guilty about the things he has committed, he would have kept his calm and cool nature and possibly getting captured by the police officers.

Pluto is a roman god and he is the god of the underworld. And it symbolizes that death is upon us. His

guilt for killing his beloved cat, made him lost. The guilt tormented him so much, to soothe his guilt he commits murder again by killing his wife just because she defended the cat.

Finally, he confessed to the police officers.

The narrator's of both short stories "*The Black Cat*" and "*The Tell Tale Heart*" are obsessed with unusual things like the black cat and the old man's pale blue eyes. In reference with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the narrators are tempted towards the obsession of the black cat and the evil eye that is [id or the pleasure principle] let's take it as the devil on the shoulder, they are so engrained in the obsession that they want to kill the source that is the old man and the black cat and his wife. Then comes [the superego or the moral principle or we can call the angel on the shoulder] which tells the narrators that they love the old man and his wife.

But in the end they give in to the obsession and kill the people they love the most.

Obsessive compulsive disorder is the main factor that drives the narrators insane. OCD patients often feel guilty. OCD makes the person unable to ignore those tempting thoughts and instead the person obsesses over unusual things like the black cat and the old man's pale blue eyes and attaches meaning to those things. OCD patients think that the thoughts they have are indeed real, causing them to feel extreme guilt, shame and worry about the things they have done. And the person with OCD believes their thoughts and acts upon those thoughts.

Guilt's relationship with OCD, often brings out the symptoms of being sensitive to the effects of every movement around them. In "*The Tell -Tale Heart*", we can see that the narrator is hypersensitive to the sounds; OCD is all about recruiting thoughts that are obsessions and actions that are uncontrollable, in other words compulsions. That's why, the narrators of "*The Black Cat*" and "*The Tell -Tale Heart*" feel extreme guilt.

Search for redemption in "*The Black Cat*" and "*The Tell -Tale Heart*". In both the short stories they feel extreme guilt and also they justify themselves by repenting towards the sin that they have committed. The guilt that is tormenting the narrators can be justified by two perspectives of guilt, one is guilt as a moral or social emotion. For example, a mother's duty according to the society's rules is to nurture and care for her babies. If one day a mother doesn't do her daily duty as a mother to care for her children, she feels guilty but the next day she does her duty wholeheartedly she is redeemed of the guilt that she had committed yesterday.

In other perspective, the guilt is referred as guilt of crime or murder. If a man kills another man and feels guilty, to get rid of the guilt he can save thousands of lives but still he will get tormented by the guilt of murder. When one kills another for selfish reasons, he can't give back the life that he has taken forcefully. Once it's gone, it's gone, even if the murderer saves thousands of lives. He will always feel guilty about the one life he has killed. There is no Redemption after taking away a life; it will torment you until the end of one's days.

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