Chapter – II

The Theory of Psychoanalysis: An Overview

In psychoanalysis, moral and social deviations are examples of a fragmented psyche caused by the malformed unconscious. This distorted counterpart of the conscious realm of human experience is the result of a crumbling or non-existent superego which, according to Sigmund Freud, represents the basis for the moral conscience of an individual. The superego is the most fundamental part of the structure of the unconscious. It overrules the ego in the same manner as the ego overpowers the id (Freud 105-6).

In the case of a fully functioning superego an individual is capable of accepting and conveying a large palate of different emotions. Ranging from love to hatred, a human being with a strong sense of right and wrong is able not only to express, but also to control the impulses of the basis for emotion known as the id (Freud 342). The measure of this control is what makes the person fit into a society with a similar moral compass. In other words, keeping one’s emotional outbursts in check constitutes societal equilibrium. On the other hand, someone with a twisted superego is more prone to violence on account of the fact that they are incapable of restraining the outbursts of emotion put forth by the id. As Jacques Lacan writes in *The Four Fundemental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*:

> The nature of psychoanalytic discourse is a “commonsensical fact that relies solely upon words”; and that we “must recognize, in the privileged attention paid to the function of the nonverbal aspects of behaviour in the psychological maneuver, a preference on the part of the analyst for a vantage point from which the subject is no longer anything but an object.

(177)
In other words, it is not only possible to perform psychoanalysis on the written text, it is imperative for the analyst, or, in this case, the interpreter of a work of art, to rely chiefly upon the written discourse. It is exactly the written word which stands at the centre of the road to objectivity.

When performing an analysis of a work written by Poe, one must establish a firm standpoint concerning the presence of obvious supernatural elements in his stories. Either an interpreter of Poe’s work assumes the position of one who takes the preternatural elements for granted, or one who attempts to deconstruct them in accordance with an interpretive model of one’s own choosing. Adopting psychoanalysis as an interpretive model of Poe’s fiction offers a truly remarkable analytical viewpoint, because it delves into the depth of the characters psyche and has the power to completely transform the general ambience of the story, giving it a new prism of fictional reality as experienced by the protagonists of Poe’s stories. Because the focus of psychoanalytical interpretation is put on the main character’s perception of reality and Poe’s stories are narrated predominantly in the first person. It is to perceive the events of the narrative strictly through the lens of the protagonist’s psyche. However, macabre and supernatural, Poe’s stories may seem that there is always a great deal of reason embodied within their scheme. Everything that happens in the narratives is explainable and is bound by the casual chain of events.

In “The Black Cat,” a notable element of the irrational is present. It is incorporated in the protagonist’s inclusion of the supernatural in his perception of reality. From the beginning of the story, the main character portrays himself as someone who is noted for the docility and humanity of his disposition (Poe 235). The interesting thing is that the protagonist, since he was a child, has been “especially fond of animals and was indulged with a great variety of pets” (235) which may be perceived as great irony considering the
fact that the story centres around him gouging his pet cat’s eye out and later hanging it by the neck. Notwithstanding in light of the employment of psychoanalysis, the aforementioned irony becomes reality. The narration of the story is written in a very rational manner. Therefore, the protagonist’s irrational behaviour towards his cat presents a discrepancy in his perception of reality. At first, the main character attempts to rationalize his behaviour by stating that this sudden change in his character is caused by “instrumentality of the fiend intemperance” (Poe 236) which is a metaphor for alcohol. Nevertheless alcohol in itself is not the cause for this behavioral shift because a person’s actions are motivated by his subconscious desires and that means that there must have been the emotion of hatred present prior to the protagonist’s drinking problem. Assuming that he grows up with animals and has never harbored any ill will toward them, from a psychoanalytical standpoint and can be stated that the protagonist’s anger which he has been harboring is not aimed his cat, but rather is somehow displaced. The displacement of emotion is very well known in psychoanalytic circles and it is first defined by Sigmund Freud, who called this phenomenon “transference”.

Transference is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalytic discourse and it has been understood in Sigmund Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* as “a reproduction of emotions relating to repressed experiences, and the substitution of another person for the original object of the repressed impulses” (Freud 313). In Laymen’s terms, transference is the displacement of amorous or hostile emotions from the original subject of said emotions onto another completely different subject. Transference encompasses one more very important element within its recesses. It is a phenomenon which is “universal and in fact dominates the whole of each person’s relations to his human environment” (Freud 67).
That being said, the narrator acquires an entirely new dimension for the explanation of the events within the story. The key component of transference has to be human but the subject towards which the emotion is conveyed via its displacement, can be a human, animal or an inanimate object. With respect to the narrative, the protagonist’s feelings of anger and hatred are aimed at a person rather than at the cat. It is important to note that the only other character in the story, a part from the policeman who shows up towards the climax of the story is the protagonist’s wife. After their pet cat is killed, another one appears and the main character assumes a rather strange attitude towards it. As Poe describes it:

When it (the second cat) reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife. For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but – I know not how or why it was – its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me. (TBC 238)

This radical and sudden shift in the behaviour of the protagonist directly points to the elements of transference being present within the recesses of his psyche. He is unable to communicate. So the element of transference takes hold and the anger is aimed at “the next best thing,” his wife’s beloved cat. In just a few short sentences, the narration takes turn and the subject of the cat finally assumes the position of the original subject of transference the wife. In other words, the narrator’s wife and the cat at which the hatred of the protagonist is directed, both becomes one and the same thing. Thus the meaning of the narration assumes a new level of interpretation and a different experience for the reader suddenly the gradually loathing for the ‘cat’ becomes a metaphor for the picture of a slowly crumbling familial relation. The narrative gains a social perspective as it slowly unfolds and culminates in the death of the protagonist’s wife finally. It is possible to
substitute the words cat, beast or creature in the text for the word ‘wife.’ The result is a very interesting metaphorical reading of “The Black Cat.” For example, when the narrator writes: “the creature left me no moment alone, and I started hourly from dreams of unutterable fear to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight – an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off – incumbent eternally upon my heart” (Poe 241).

Transference appears to be the force at play during the second part of the story. The protagonist’s wife and their pet merge into one twisted persona within the depths of the narrator’s psyche. Though he does not realize it, his unconscious mind is directing his actions as well as his conscious mind. It describes the futility which the protagonist feels in relation to his wife. He clearly detests his wife. However, the social pressure imposed upon him by the institution of marriage, he is forced to submerge his feelings. As a result he defensively acquires the psychopathic traits. Unable to cope with his hostile feelings towards his spouse, the force of transference takes hold and directs to the object of the protagonist’s wife’s affection – the cat.

The narrator’s feelings and the confusion they convey are walled into his subconscious mind and his impotence in making the emotions surface in his conscious mind is the cause of his defense mechanisms in the form of transference to take control. Transference simply helps the protagonist to “cross the dam” of social pressure but in the process, it takes its toll in the form of the protagonist acquiring-the psychopathic trait. As it can be seen from the written discourse of the narrator and feeling that a reader gets when reading “The Black Cat,” the protagonist picks up all the above mentioned traits. The social pressure instituted on him by the act of marriage forces his subconscious to act for him by, at first, displaying violent behaviour towards his cat, as transference gradually releases its hold, killing the true object of his repressed feelings - his wife, an act which
results in the disregard for the social realm of the human experience that represses his superego. The latter is realized by the protagonist’s narration. Before the end of the story, he kills his wife and dryly expresses his brutality of the act of murder. There is a radical shift in narration, as the protagonist completely dehumanizes his wife. An animate human being becomes a mere it. As Poe writes:

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well of the yard – about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting the porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar, as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims. (TBC 242)

This appears to be moment when the protagonist comes to terms with his feelings which merge with his real persona of a psychopath. After the murder is committed, the further discourse offers only fleeting mentioning of the cat. This leads to the assumption that the narrator does not really care about the cat because his misdirected feelings towards it have finally found the original target which becomes his victim.

As examination of Edgar Poe’s short story “The Black Cat” perceived through the lens of psychoanalytic discourse has shown that fictional reality of this story, perceived by the narrator, is greatly on the account of the fact that the psychoanalytic inquiry of his
actions has shown discrepancies in his perception of reality. This is tinctured by the inclusion of supernatural elements within the narration. The analysis also concludes that “The Black Cat” can be interpreted as a narrative dealing not with the supernatural, but rather with the natural and the casual. Furthermore, the deconstruction of the narration has uncovered an underlying motivator behind the inner workings of the story.

Progression materializes the form of a strong social element woven into the fabric of the narrative. The social element is realized through the element of transference. It forces the character to acquire psychopathic traits as a defense mechanism against the frustration which is being kept at bay by society via the institution of marriage.

Regarded as the originator of the modern short story and master of the form, Poe establishes a highly influential rationale for short narrative art, which emphasizes the deliberate arrangement of a story’s minutest details of setting, characterization, and structure in order to impress an effect on the reader. He demonstrates a brilliant command of this technique – often eliciting terror, or passion or horror from his readers - as well as an uncommon imagination suffused with eerie thoughts, weird impulses, and foreboding fear. Renowned for cultivating an aura of mystery and a taste for the ghastly in his fiction, Poe relies on his imagination and literary skills to animate the disconcerting effects of his “takes of horror” especially those dealing with crime and moral depravity.

Among the later kind, “The Cask of Amontillado” ranks as one of Poe’s finest stories. Originally published in November 1846, in Godey’s Lady’s Book, “The Cask of Amontillado” has become a classic tale of revenge, distinguished by the subtle irony that pervades many levels of the Poe’s uncharacteristic use of dialogue between the protagonist and antagonist as the principal structural device of the narrative. Set in an anonymous city somewhere in the Mediterranean region of Europe during the festivities of the carnival season, “The Cask of Amontillado” recounts the last meeting between two
aristocratic gentlemen the narrator Montessori and the wine connoisseur Fortunate. As the story begins, Montessori plots a perfect revenge for the thousand injuries instigated by Fortunate, who once again insults him, although the particulars are never indicated. Montessori encounters the tipsy Fortunato dressed as fool’s motley and informs him that a recently acquired cask of Amontillado sherry awaits his discriminating palate in Montessori’s underground cellars. Eager to taste the wine, Fortunato follows Montessori to his palazzo and into the vaults. Although Fortunato has a cough that is aggravated by the damp air and potassium nitrate hanging in the tunnels through which they pass, he is spurred onward after he learns that his rival lurches may be permitted to taste Montresor’s new wine. Engaging fortunate in dialogue of irony, Montresor lures his victim deep into the family catacombs, urging him to try other wines and when Fortunato grows impatient to sample the fresh mortar nearby, Montessori begins to entomb Fortunato to brick by brick. Fortunato cries in vain for release. As Montresor finishes his task, the bells on Fortunato’s costume jingle faintly. Montessori then hides his handy work behind a pile of his ancestor’s bones and concludes that no one has disturbed them for fifty years. In “The Cask of Amontillado” there are two parts equally important to Montresor's revenge: “I must not only punish, but punish with impunity”; and “the avenger must make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong” (TCA 36).

Montresor succeeds in his revenge that is required as a mirror that will reflect the ironic sense in which Montresor fails. Poe has taken revenge theme and reversed the whole thing by a pervasive irony; he has set up a problem of requirements and fulfillment with a mathematical precision and solved it as a poet. His method is to establish in great detail an ironic parallel between Fortunate and Montresor, so that by the end they are virtually identified. Fortunate approaches the edge of completion this carefully built ironic parallel points to the crucial irony -- the profound failure of the revenge.
First, Montresor does not really fulfill the requirement of explaining his motive to Fortunate. Such a deed of Montresor is incredible to him except as some monstrous joke, but this hope is killed by Montresor’s mockery. Finally, Fortunate makes his appeal “For the love of God, Montresor!” but Montresor’s replay of cold mockeries so profoundly irrational that it drives him mad. The only further sound which Montresor can provoke from the crypt is “a jingling of the bells”; Fortunate has escaped to the haven of the fool.

Considered by many critics (and by the author) as the best of all of Poe’s stories due to the absence of the sensational, “The Purloined Letter” is the third and last contribution to form he had himself invited.

According to Lacan, “The Purloined Letter” is divided into two scenes; the primal scene – that happens in the royal boudoir – and its repetition – the other one takes place in the Minister’s office. Like the future readings of Jacques Derrida and Barbara Johnson, Lacan enlarges upon the numerical / geometrical structure of the story. The triangular structure of each of these scenes is further divided by Lacan into three logical moments:

Thus three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters. The first is a glance that sees nothing: the King and the police. The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister. The third sees that the first two glances leave what should have be hidden is exposed to whomever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin. In order to grasp in its unity the intersubjective complex thus described, we would willingly seek a model in the technique legendarily attributed to the ostrich attempting to shield itself from danger; for that technique might ultimately be qualified as political, divided as it is among three partners: the second believing itself invisible
because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting
the third calmly pluck its rear. (Lacan 44)

The only person that is present in both scenes is the Minister who shifts from his
initial position of third glance to the second glance in the scene where Dupin manages to
purloin the letter; this is exactly the vulnerability of self-delusion. The possessor of the
letter gains entry in the repetitive scenes. Derrida trying to set scores with Lacan for
earlier “acts of aggression,” attacks the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” and its
triangular structure of scenes. Derrida admits that the story consists of two scenes but not
the two as identified by Lacan. His innovative approach points to the two scenes of
narration (the first visit of the prefect when he exposes the facts of the theft from the
royal boudoir and the second visit when Dupin recounts the way he managed to find and
steal the letter back) as the main events of the story as opposed to the two narrated scenes
(the one forms the Queen’s chamber and the other, the Minister’s office) told by Dupin
and the prefect; this makes Dupin’s unnamed companion, the main narrator. Derrida
believes in his wish to read the story as an allegory of psychoanalysis, Lacan has reduced
“the scene of action” from a four-sided one to a triangular by ignoring the presence of the
narrator of “The Purloined Letter:”

Derrida sees the triangular configuration of the Oedipal triangle that attempts at
absorbing the uncanny effect of the doubling in his opinion throughout the tale since the
criminal mind is the most common method of detective investigation. The analytic
detective story uses this technique to anticipate the moves and be one step in front of the
adversary. J.T. Irwin in his *The Paradox of Self-Inclusion* explains the numerical
association of the doubling:

The number associated with doubling is usually four rather than two, for
what we refer to as doubling is almost always splitting and doubling. Which
is to say, the figure of the double externally duplicates an internal division in
the protagonist’s self (but with the master / slave polarity of that
division characteristically reversed), so that doubling tends to be a structure
of four halves problematically balanced across the inner / outer limit of the
self rather than a structure of two separate, opposing wholes. (5)

In order to decipher the mystery involving the location of the letter Dupin must
double the thoughts of his opponent: both as poet and mathematician. This mental
operation that Dupin explains by recounting the story of the schoolboy that always won at
the game of even and odd helps him get inside the Minister’s head and think just like him
when he seizes the letter. The position that Dupin places himself now makes the Minister
play the role of the Queen from the original event.

In her study, Barbara Johnson identifies in Lacan’s triangular and Derrida’s
quadrangular readings of the structure of “The Purloined Letter” the game of even and
odd where the two critics end up as reciprocal opposites of one another; or, as Irwin
concludes it, “Derrida asserts the oddness of evenness, while Lacan affirms the evenness
of oddness” (Irwin 6).

If it at first seems possible to say that Derrida opposes the unsystematizable to the
systematized, “chance” to psychoanalytical “determinism,” or the “undecidable” to the
“destination,” the positions of these oppositions seem now to be reversed: Lacan’s
apparently unequivocal ending says only its own dissemination, while “dissemination”
has erected itself into a kind of “last word.” But these oppositions are themselves
misreading of the dynamic functioning of what is at stake here. For if the letter is
precisely that which dictates the rhetorical indetermination of any theoretical discourse
about it, then the oscillation between unequivocal statements of undecidability and
ambiguous assertions of decidability is precisely one of the letter’s inevitable effects. The
“undeterminable” is not opposed to the determinable; “dissemination” is not opposed to repetition. If we could be sure of the difference between the determinable and the undeterminable, the undeterminable would be comprehended within the determinable. What is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decidable or not (504).

“What is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decidable or not” is a self-including statement consisting of an aporia between grammar and rhetoric; according to Paul de Man, “The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning” (29).

In analysing the symmetry and its effects present in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” Lacan’s “Seminar” and Derrida’s reading of the tale, Johnson states that:

> It is the act of analysis which seems to occupy the center of the discursive stage, and the act of analysis of the act of analysis which in some way disrupts that centrality. In the resulting asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis – including this one – can intervene without transforming and repeating other elements in the sequence, which is thus not a stable sequence, but which nevertheless produces certain regular effects. (Johnson 457)

The process of making a statement that includes itself present throughout “The Purloined Letter” is nothing more than the act of taking a poison self-consciously doubled beak upon itself; the paradox of self-inclusion the effect of thought about thought that takes form at the edge of the vortex of Poe’s analytic narrative.

By choosing a number, Lacan and Derrida enter the game of even and odd, “the game of being one up on a specular, antithetical double” (Irwin 6) that means repeating infinitely the structure of “The Purloined Letter.” By reading Derrida’s “The Purveyor of
Truth,” Johnson herself – even if she apparently refuses to take a numerical position on the structure of the tale – starts playing the game that consists in doubling the thought process of the opponent so that to outwit him with his own weapons; but sooner or later the same method will be used by the next player “in order to leave the preceding interpreter one down” (Irwin 7).

Dupin’s method of detection is based on two logical premises that will eventually lead to the solution of the mystery: the psychological identification with the opponent and acknowledging the fact that the obvious might be hidden in plain sight, exemplifying it by an analogy’s to game strategy. Dupin duplicates the Minister’s way of reasoning and predicts his tactics. As he says:

Such a man, I considered, could not fail to be aware of the ordinary political modes of action. He could not have failed to anticipate – and events have proved that he did not fail to anticipate – the way laying to which he was subjected. He must have foreseen, I reflected, the secret investigations of his premises. His frequent absences from home at night, which were hailed by the Prefect as certain aids to his success, I regarded only as ruses, to afford opportunity for thorough search to the police, and thus sooner to impress them with the conviction to which G-- in fact, did finally arrive – the conviction that the letter was not upon the premises. I felt, also, that the whole train of thought, which I was at some pains in detailing to you just now, concerning the invariable principle of political action in searches for articles concealed. I felt that this whole train of thought would necessarily pass through the mind of the Minister. It would imperatively lead him to despise all the ordinary nooks of concealment. He could not, I reflected, be so weak as not to see that the most intricate and
remote recess of his hotel would be as open as his commonest closets to the eyes, to the probes, to the gimlets, and to the microscopes of the Prefect. I saw, in fine, that he would be driven, as a matter of course, to simplicity, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice. (TPL 105-106)

Even the central symbol of the tale in “The Purloined Letter” is the same as if betrays the textual self-inclusion. Poe intends to create giving the symbolic object the same qualities of the text itself. This aspect of the letter is by its unique quality, the fact that it is always hidden in the royal boudoir. It is concealed on the table with its address on the surface and the content unexposed and in the Minister’s office. It hangs in a card rack above the mantelpiece turned inside out like a grove and contained, the reversal of container and contained. “The object called the purloined letter, described and thus contained in the story called “The Purloined Letter,” is a self-included linguistic representation of the text’s own representational status, in effect a symbol of the conditions of linguistic representationally” (Irwin 22). Self-inclusion or the mirror image, in Lacanian terms, is seen as either an opposition (right versus left) or as something identical, identifying the adversary with a version of the alter ego. This kind of relation, be it in contrast or identical, is classified by Lacan as “imaginary,” a realm where mirroring juxtaposes inter subjective structures but also a realm where the imaginary must be disrupted so that the symbolic may emerge. The difference between a thing and its self-included representation should be in detail and/or size or otherwise it will not be distinguishable as in Lewis Carroll’s “Sylvie and Bruno” that describes a natural size map of a country:

We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!”

It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected:
they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well. (556-557)

Josiah Royce in “The World and the Individual” imagines an exact map of England built on one part of England’s surface:

A map of England, contained within England, is to represent, down to the minutest detail, every contour and marking, natural or artificial, that occurs upon the surface of England. For the map, in order to be complete, according to the rule given, will have to contain as a part of itself, a representation of its own contour and contents. In order that this representation should be constructed, the representation itself will have to contain once more, as a part of itself, a representation of its own contour and contents; and this representation, in order to be exact will have once more to contain an image of itself; and so on without limit. (46)

Borges concludes that the outer / inner relationship between container and contained is only a reversal that infinitely repeats itself. This endless reversal, reminding Mobius strip transforms into a complex process in the case of self–inclusion.

The symbols can be encountered only as a tear in the fabric of the imaginary, a revealing interruption. The paths to the symbolic are thus in the imaginary. The symbols can be reached only by not trying to avoid the imaginary, by knowingly being in the imaginary. Likewise, mastery of the illusions that psychoanalysis calls transference can be attained only by falling prey to those illusions, by losing one’s position of objectivity, control, or mastery in relation to them.