



## THE TRANSGRESSIVE SUBLIME IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE TELL-TALE HEART" AND "THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE"

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### Abstract

This article enquires into Edgar Allan Poe's (1809-1849) "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) in the light of the Kantian sublime. These stories of horror genre contain sublime experience; they are the mixture of horror, terror and pleasure which disturbs the human reason. They are the analyses of amoral and transgressive acts. The transgressors kill their victims obsessively and arbitrarily to construct order and beauty for themselves; their experiences of the sublime realize first through their committing murders intelligently and talentedly, and then making confessions of them. The obsessive-compulsive disorder and paranoia together stand out in the most extreme, leading to ignore the aftermaths of their actions. Both narrators assert that their urges and deeds are normal, necessary and inevitable. They experience the sublime through pleasure while doing evil which makes the reader/the perceiving subject experience the sublime at the same time, not getting pleasure but through wonder, suspense and terror. The narrators experience the sublime much later, while confessing, and make the reader undergo the sublime experience of wonder, horror, suspense and terror together, leaving him aback.

The stories are the discussions about the nature of the unknown and the irresistible motives to do wrong. Using the aesthetic theory of pleasure and terror, and feeling the depths of the unconscious, Poe scrutinizes these urges. He elaborates on what lies beyond reason, the common and the worldly, that is the sublime subverting Kant's notions about the working of human mind.

**Keywords:** Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Imp of the Perverse", Kant, The Sublime.

### I. Introduction

For Dark Romantic/gothic writers have delight in transgression and representation of evil, their works often present stories of the sublime through perversity: *Frankenstein* (1818) and the stories of H.P. Lovecraft are among many. They are interested in the dark side of human nature and the tools that take them to the depths of it and to the sublime: perverse thinking and visualization of terrible scenes. One common point of all these works is that they stimulate the sublime in transgressive and evil acts such as committing murders. For Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) inclination to perversity and the capacity of man's enjoying or committing perverse actions and crimes is universal to all mankind. He regards the sublime as the equivalent of his 'single-effect' concept and achieves the transgressive sublime/'the single effect' by including the readers into the sphere of the perverse narrators'/characters' points of view and into the identification with them. This article aims at proving that he through his peculiar use of the sublime, which includes taking the risk of going beyond the 'ordinary' or familiar types of the sublime invalidates Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) notion of the sublime depending on the elaboration of his major psychological themes of transgression and perversity.

The Gothic emerged as a romantic response to the boundaries and basic tenets of the Enlightenment thinking, and the gothic sensibility is fascinated with the anxiety over its philosophical and aesthetic limits. It focuses on the anti-social, the irrational, and the immoral; so it is closely related to transgression. In this respect, it transgresses the established socio-cultural and aesthetic values. It proves that progress is impossible as long as imagination overwhelms reason and unexplainable phenomena whether in human psyche or in the universe will exist. In this respect, as a Romantic concept and in the gothic context, the sublime often emerges in transgressive acts. A major trope of the Gothic, it denotes intense emotions in the face of power and infinity, elevating the mind and the imagination together. The sublime signifies the transgression of rational mind, so it can be syntesized that the Gothic and the sublime are the two interlocked areas of aesthetic theory. The sublime is a link between terror and pleasure. It is something that disturbs and subdues the human reason and imagination. Although it seems paradoxical that seemingly displeasing things such as terror and pain can produce the sublime, it is a negative bliss and delight in gothic sense.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) claimed that for terror is the strongest emotion, it is the most sublime and dreadful pleasure provided that the subject feels safe. In the Age of Reason, the term meant something

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beyond reason. As an Enlightenment thinker, Immanuel Kant, especially in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) includes the concept of the sublime in his aesthetic theory. For him, in the moment of the experience of the sublime, consciousness of self becomes lost. "In the Kantian sublime, the subject feels this loss of self as a moment of transcendence, one in which a meaningful sense of a pure noumenal realm is intimated" (Smith 2). In his reason/imagination, or, phenomenal/noumenal duality, he understands the empirical nature of sublimity within the frame of reason. For him, human beings are "finite rational beings" (Kant, 1997, 23). Kant's reading of the sublime has three standpoints. One is that the sublime expresses a power larger than man, which makes him experience his insignificance either intellectually or sensually. Second, it is composed of both positive and negative aspects: "The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law" (Kant, 1986, 106). Third, he views that the fear provokes the sublime moment and vice versa and thus the sublime in the larger sense, is intellectual. He names knowledge of the sensible world as *a posteriori* which depends on experience and defines metaphysics as *a priori*, accepted abstract knowledge beforehand, and something that does not depend on experience. For him, man experiences terror when he can grasp a phenomenon neither through reason nor senses; but this failure gives him at the same time, bliss. "The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense," (Kant, 1986, 98) he says, confining it only to reason. He regards aesthetics in the second place and aims at uniting reason with experience. For him, experience is only senses, perceptions and thoughts, not feelings and they are controlled by the will. Poe opposes him in that this process should not be so mechanical. He says that the sublime cannot be perceived and explained only through senses.

## II. Discussion

Poe thinks that the sublime must be scrutinized and scorns Kant because he accepts what he cannot explain beforehand. He says that Kant evades exploring where it comes from and why it emerges. He rejects Kant's deductive method and does not see his dualities and distinctions proper, siding with Romantic aesthetics. He claims that for the moment of the sublime is the moment of rational collapse, one cannot explain this collapse through the tools of rational thought. He implies another sphere of knowledge other than reason/imagination duality. For he sees that human nature craves for transcending reason to experience the sublime, he deals with the notions of self and psyche that are not clear at his time.

Perverse people, on the other hand, are "obstinate in opposing what is right, reasonable, or accepted" (Merriam-Webster). From the Middle Ages onwards, (the word was first seen in the 14th century) a pervert refers to a person who derives utmost pleasure from unlawful and immoral deeds and destruction of either his or others' self or body with an uncontrollable desire. He transgresses social and universal moral norms repeatedly and exaggeratedly. At this point, perversity too, intertwines with gothic sensibility and the sublime. Before Immanuel Kant, Plotinus (204-270) comes first to deal with the nature of perversity. Manichean dualism defends the idea of a universe that is the arena of the continual struggle between the good and the evil and Saint Augustine (354-430) acknowledges government as the representative of God on the Earth and God creates only the good. Kant is in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) is the first to employ a secular theory of evil. He sees evil springing from the will that is not adequately good. That is, evil will harbors evil deeds. For him, perversity is the utmost degree of self-love and the zenith of wickedness. If a man has a perverse will, he uses/abuses his conditions for the favor of perversity and against the universal moral law. He matches perverse will with perverse/evil man.

Kant says that an action is called evil when there is deliberation, plan and resolution. His concept of 'radical evil' is related to the elucidation of wickedness. Radical evil causes men to cherish their self-interest over moral law. It corrupts both reason and perceptions. There is an impulse - or radical evil or an imp in human beings that impels them to act irrationally, without a reasonable motive. Fascinated with this motive, Poe calls this perverseness, the root cause of evil deed, like Kant. He uses perversity both as a literary subject and as a device for gothic sublimity. He contributes to the realm of the sublime:

The pure Imagination chooses, *from either beauty or deformity*, only the most combinable things hitherto uncombined;- the compound as a general rule, partaking (in character) of sublimity or beauty, in the ratio of the respective sublimity or beauty of the things combined ... But, as often analogously happens in physical chemistry, so not unfrequently does it happen in this chemistry of the intellect, that the admixture of two elements will result in something that shall have nothing of



the quality of one of them - or even nothing of the qualities of either... Even out of deformities it fabricates that *Beauty* which is at once its sole object and its inevitable test (Poe in Thompson 278).

In Kant's view, unreasonable and immoral feelings can penetrate into the sphere of reason and find place in judgments; moreover, they can flow into action. For Poe, this is a logical problem and he answers it by drawing attention to the existence of a sphere, unknown in his time: the unconscious. It includes an urge, another factor that controls both reason and imagination, or 'the imp of the perverse' in human psyche. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), both narrators are well-educated and intelligent, and can control their minds and senses capably; but though they are aware of this third factor, they cannot identify it within their *a priori* knowledge about human mind. They are the slaves of their rationality/will and self-love and it leads them to do evil without any control of moral law. They are 'rational' if we use Kant's system of thought. Poe suggests that if they had feelings or imagination, they would not do the deeds, and this instinct is universal; even the intellectual/rational men can have propensity for it, even they have moral law. Kant's approach to knowledge as the product of the mind, and knowledge as partly *a priori* which orders the perceptions seem unsatisfying to Poe to elucidate such phenomena as the urge to commit crime, derive pleasure from it and experience the sublime. The transgressors or the readers do not feel themselves insignificant when they undergo the sublime.

For Kant, the reason for evil deeds/perversity is unknown and comes from innate urges; so it is *a priori*. On the other hand, pure reason is not sufficient to find the right path or analyze psychological issues as seen in the stories. Both transgressors can be called evil, because they commit the murders deliberately. With posterior incentives, they determine their actions. They find causes or ideas to justify their ill-intentioned impulses. The transgressors /narrators/murderers kill their victims obsessively to construct order for themselves; their experiences of the sublime realize first through their persuading themselves to commit the crimes. To plan and to commit the murders intelligently come later, and then making confessions of them is the other occasion for the sublime. Reciprocally, brutality shocks the sensibilities of the reader and incites the sublime in him.

Poe's attraction of the transgressive sublime and emphasis on 'the single effect' are obvious in his selected short stories, too. Poe, as a Romantic, preferring to delve into the human psyche, finds the sublime in the characters' killing old men. The stories are the analyses of amoral and transgressive acts and the characters are perverse. He naturalizes the characters' perverse feelings, thoughts and actions beginning with suspense and obsession and continuing until their ends. For his understanding of the beautiful is in broad sense, in his aesthetic theory, beauty has the kind of the sublime, which can be achieved through different or contrary emotions, including terror and perversity. According to Kant, things that are contrary to the moral law cannot be beautiful, but Poe proves their possibility. Frank sees "...Poe's major themes of perversity, revenge, tormented guilt,..." (258) as the tools for achieving the sublime. Again, McGhee states: "the path to sublimity is an internal one, ... rather than a grandiose experience of the external world. Poe's sublimity leads not to a Kantian mastery over nature, but through perversity and disease,..." (2018, 56) to the formation of dramatic effect. In the stories, it is not Poe's concern to study the moral dimension of the deeds, nor to analyze moral/intellectual duality but to open a discussion on how a single effect of transgressive sublime is able to take hold of the reader from the beginning until the end of the deed in question, even if both the characters and the reader are sane in the Kantian view. The reader is fascinated by the breathless narration and is not allowed to use his ratiocination. Poe identifies the reader with the narrator/writer: "During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (Poe in Hutchisson 526). He is magnetized and yields to feel distress adopting the point of view and desiring a higher level of the sublime.

Both narrators observe their victims' physicality/existence and find visible or invisible deficiencies in them. Their perceptions lead to feel disgust or a desire to destroy them. This feeling is out of reason; more accurately, it is out of morality. On the other hand, "Poe's conjurations of the sublime are most often Burkean in their principle attributes" (Burwick, 2017, 426). "In the Tell-Tale Heart" he achieves this through Burkean visual sublimity, which Kant denigrates as irrational. In the story, senses of sight and hearing incite feeling of enmity against an old man's one eye, which reminds the transgressor of a vulture's. This perception leads the transgressor to feel and think that it must be destroyed. The idea becomes an obsession. Although he likes his victim and has no problem with him, a slight vexing detail - the eye - motivates him. He decides insanely: "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture - a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees -very gradually- I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever" (Poe, "Tell-Tale" 74). These words are shocking for the reader, but attractive at the same time. "He



feels and intensely enjoys the seeming novelty of the thought, enjoys it as really novel, as absolutely original with the writer - *and himself*" (Poe in Harrison 146). It opens the way to the sublime; moreover, "the narrator seduces the listener by getting him to participate vicariously in the crime, an accomplice after the fact." (Witherington, 2018, 472).

With the insistence of the narrator of his sanity, the reader, identified with him hears the heart beating of the victim's, in fact the narrator's. It is heard both before and after the murder. His emotional tension, misperception and misunderstanding are obvious by his confusing his own heart beating with the victim's. Acuteness of the senses, mental illness, frantic verbalism and tightness of time perceived by him contribute to the gothic sublime by elevating the excitement of the reader, leading him to complicity. Though "the narrator's insistent denial of the charge of insanity fits the pattern of symptoms of the homicidal maniac,..." (Cleman, 2018, 632) he is persuaded by the boastful narrator's comments: "observe how healthily - how calmly I can tell you the whole story.... You should have seen how wisely I proceeded - with what caution - with what foresight - with what dissimulation I went to work!" (Poe, "Tell-Tale", 74)

According to the transgressor, madness is the sharpness of the senses. He is obsessed with the idea that he is not mad and tries to prove this via several examples. He tries to persuade himself and the reader that if he can deduce, judge and criticize, he is sane. Poe scorns Kant's belief in the supreme power of reason, in the story. The transgressor is a very intellectual man but he is mad. Only senses and reason are not enough to prove a man sane. His sublime experience actualizes for the second time in his murdering the victim in cold blood: "The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs" (Poe, "Tell-Tale", 76). His confession of the murder causes another sublime experience:

Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! - no, no! They heard! - they suspected! - they *knew!* - they were making a mockery of my horror! - this I thought, and this I think. But any thing was better than this agony! Any thing was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! - and now - again! - hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!* -

"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!" (Poe, "Tell-Tale", 78)

These sublime experiences provoke in the reader the same experience; not through complete happiness, but through terror, with reason suspended. He convinces himself that he has nothing to fear and meets the policemen smiling. His near past comes back to haunt as a ringing in the ears, but he soon finds that it comes from his heart. The more the noise increases, the more he gets excited. He supposes that the policemen know the fact and make fun of him. Only when he feels, he is in right mind: "I felt that I must scream or die!..." (Poe, "Tell-Tale", 78) He confesses his guilt showing the place he buried the corpse: under the planks in the house. The reader is first attracted undergoing the sublime, then feels repulsion.

In "The Imp of the Perverse" for the perverse transgressor, "the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable force which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution. Nor will this overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake, admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements. It is a radical, a primitive impulse -elementary" (Poe, "Perverse"). The voice is obviously Kant's. The narrator knows philosophy and analyzes human nature elaborately; but he cannot find a clear explanation for this basic motivation - perverseness - through reasoning. Furthermore, he cannot control his tendency to it. It is "a mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt. Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; ... through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not" (Poe "Perverse"). He is curious about what will happen if one continues the farther stages of the transgression. In this vein, "the reader finds herself or himself as the intimate friend of a murderer and thief" (Fineman, 2013, 72).

After the decision of murder the transgressor chooses an eccentric method for it: a poisoned candle. Like the other transgressor, he pursues the sublime caused by his 'radical evil': Acting without a reason is unreasonable, but sometimes "it becomes absolutely irresistible" (Poe, "Perverse") and the perverse impulse gains control. Delighted by the idea that he can go beyond the ordinary sublime, he kills the man. He behaves only with thoughts and reason; there is no place for feeling. Only one part of the mind, Poe hints is monstrous, not sensible. It is through the sublime terrors that he has complete happiness in killing the victim. Here, it becomes obvious that full-open senses are not enough to be mentally healthy; the psyche must be whole for Poe. After many years of affluence and 'security', the repressed guilt haunts him, returning. He feels that his security is shaken. He begins obsessively to persuade himself that he is safe. At





a later stage, the imp works and he needs to add that if he does not confess, or can resist what his imagination creates he is safe. But, he knows that he is weak at this. He is in ridiculous condition when he repeats in a frenzy of reason: "I am safe - I am safe - yes - if I be not fool enough to make open confession!" (Poe, "Perverse")

To confess is a prohibition, but at the same time, an irresistible motivation, an imp and another stage of the sublime. The idea persecutes him until he surrenders to confess. All his knowledge counts nothing to silence this urge and it means his catastrophe. He feels physical pressure and with the failure of reason, reveals the secret. When he confesses his crime, he is psychologically released. Both he and the reader have another negative sublime. While he was wearing the fetters, he demands understanding and approval. He tries to persuade the reader that he is not mad, only a victim of the imp of the perverse, creating a false ethic; but in Kantian terms, he is sane, only his will lacks goodness.

Poe's gothic art reveals the primordial perverseness inherent in human nature by leading the reader to take secret pleasure in transgressive sublime phenomena. This is Poe's achievement to make readers forget that the deeds are immoral and unreasonable, in short perverse. He draws him into the atmosphere of the story to share the motivation, thought/reasoning and the soul of the action. This pattern is accepted by the reader; he is transfixed by 'the single effect' of the transgressive sublime. It is for the reader's part interesting to see what will happen if one dares step the next stage. Poe's dexterity in the language of the stories supports the process of the sublime. The pace of the narrators' speech is tensioned and hurried and it engulfs the reader into the silent content of the actions. He feels blissful and powerful at the same time with the narrators. Poe expands the sphere of the sublime where intellect, reason and feeling merge contrary to Kant's confinement it only to reason.

The narrators ignore universal morality and the aftermaths of their actions for they are transgressors adopting subjective morality. Both of them crave for self-transcendence by experiencing the terror of the sublime. They experience the sublime through pleasure while doing evil. This makes the reader experience the sublime spontaneously, not getting pleasure, but through wonder and terror. The narrators experience terror later while confessing and make the reader undergo the sublime experience of horror, suspense and terror, leaving him shocked by his own complex emotions. Viewed from the side of the reader, the mixture of horror, terror and pleasure disturbs his reason. But this disturbance immediately leaves its place to gaining pleasure out of incapability to comprehend. He experiences safely the sublime via tension and dread.

### III. Conclusion

Poe sheds light on the psychology of the guilty conscience, pregnant with the sublime experience in the stories. For the part of the reader, the interplay between astonishment and reassurance in the sublime moment, when he feels overwhelmed, leaves its place to the other or the disgusting. The narrators try to persuade the reader that they are not crazy. They have fake reasons: if they are reasonable and cautious and can judge, they are sane. Their senses and the intellectual capacities are complete but their will is lost to link ethic dimension with their desires. If they were reasonable in the real sense, they would not follow their urges. Poe, at this point, questions reason and Kant's idea that only reasonable people can undergo the sublime. The narrators can judge, deduce and reason; they are cultured, but confronted with perversity - the unconscious or the imp, their controlling mechanism of the prudent reason is lost. Reason is transparent and fragile for Poe. So, unlike Kant, he thinks that reason is not a secure sphere on which the processes of mind can be analyzed and he reconstitutes the perception of the source of evil.

Both Kant and Poe agree on man's natural inclination to transgression. They also agree that the sublime realizes at its best when terror joins delight. The narrators pursue and undergo the sublime through transgression. They are 'Kantian' in that they always follow reason in their perceptions, senses and judgments. Poe proves that perceptions can be illusory and may form a wrong sense of reality, unlike Kant. In Kantian reason/imagination (feeling) duality, the sublime for Poe does belong to the latter side, not to the first. Poe scrutinizes the sublime based on pleasure and terror, and implies the depths of the unconscious. He explores what lies beyond the limits of reason. The urge and the foundation of the murders for him is not of course the imp in human nature but, some other power; the unconscious, even if the term has not been identified or defined in his time. He mocks Kant in that there is not a separate layer of human nature in Kantian philosophy for these unconscious processes.

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