

Sierra Jorgensen

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Dr. Todd Goddard

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Haunting Escapes & False Characters

Escaping real life is not as easy as some make it out to be. Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, both well-versed in education and a love for flaunting abhorring faults in their characters could be seen as your typical “gothic-writers”, masters of death and disdain for old tradition, but really, what does that mean? Old traditions, elements of fury, ineptitude of emotion, and other mundane feelings, all were once part of old times, a place where visions of past generations and their overwhelming urge to control young minds mingled with suppressive emotions buried deep in the souls of the youth. Are the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne windows to the inevitability of escaping hauntings of past traditions? Or are they allegorical tales to help those recognize the importance of using new traditions and newer standards in place of repeating the same mistakes with different approaches?

What makes a good ending? Is it the damsel in distress being rescued by the knight who learned the true code of honor? Could it be seen as the widow finding new love after a tragic journey of self-reclamation and progressive renewal of love? Or, like Edgar Allan Poe might have thought, is there no such thing as a “good ending”? Could a good ending be taken more as a test of truth, of knowledge and knowing your morality was questioned during a specific trial, tragedy or journey of enlightenment? Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Black Cat* are just two of the many stories written that could shed light on a “good ending”

versus the “true ending”. True endings are as rare as the life Poe lived as an outcast of sorts. His turbulent life of losing parents, having his foster parents think less of him than his step-siblings, and losing his wife at such a young age could only contribute to the literary death, heartache and loss of self recognition. Each of the rooms in *The Masque of the Red Death* could be seen not just as different colors slowly advancing to black, or death, as most will symbolize it to be, but can be personified as systems of a body. Each color represents their purpose in one unified spectrum, and the heart of it all contains the most living thing, complete with a constant reminder of time, or the impending approach of death. According to Poe, “There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there *are* matters of which no jest can be properly made” (Levine 665). Chords, hearts, emotion, all strong and present things in a physical being. Some believe that Poe’s writings can be easily analyzed and black-and-white broken down to “this means this” and “that item is really symbolic of guilt”, but Poe is more complex. The jokes Poe speaks of could be interpreted as how Prince Prospero is laughing at death, thinking he can avoid it because of his status, title, and the amount of wealth he possesses. Little does he know that Death is more than a simple plague or virus that depletes the inner workings of a human, but quite literally depicted as “tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave” (Levine 665). Unsurprisingly, this particular ending just proves that escaping a haunting plague only brings to light how simple people can be to foolishly believe that tragedies of life never impact them, only those around them.

With Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown*, this ideology is even more present with Goodman and his wife, Faith. So aptly named for her virtue and delicate grace in life, the

same could not be said for Young Goodman, rejecting the idea of identifying with one's self and working towards improvement. His thinking of "My journey...forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise. What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already and we but three months married!" (Levine 346) can only be proven to be foolish, naive, instead of "good". To be "good", one has to prove themselves and their knowledge of the exact opposite, "evil". What does the difference mean? Seemingly simplistic in their nature, both of these words can only be construed as more complex than Young Goodman can comprehend. Challenging this while willingly going into the woods, knowing he would be partaking in "sinful deeds" and worried of "What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!" (Levine 346) and mischief and devilish works. Escaping this unnerving journey and hoping for a "good ending" is mischief of itself. For one thing, Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* is an allegorical mockery of sorts, Goodman Brown trying and failing at maintaining a posture that can only be tested by turning away from a righteous stance and advancing to the other side to better understand "evil" instead of naively "good" natures.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* is an abusive, negligent tale of alcoholism and growing progressively with negative feelings towards loved ones. A tragically truthful tale of how those who cannot seem to deal with cynical cruelty displayed in acts of murder, Poe seems to emulate how the main character could not comprehend true guilt. "When reason returned with the morning-when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch-I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but I was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed." (Levine 671). A character lacking "truth" in what it

means to be truly repentant and accept guilty feelings is NOT what Poe's character in *The Black Cat* represented. Like Young Goodman Brown in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, Poe's character is oblivious to the false sense of security he projects in his loving wife. With Goodman Brown, Faith and her pink ribbons seem to represent goodness and purity, a signifier of Brown's virtuously young wife, only to be tainted later in the story with sickening feelings of seeing those same pink ribbons hanging in the trees whilst on the way to the Devil's communion. Poe's character in *The Black Cat* only projects moralistic guilt because in the end, the cat he had murdered turned against him and allowed him to progress to cold-blooded murder of his wife, another projection of his guilt for the first crime.

What makes a "true character"? A sense of guilty morality with the character's drinking in Poe's *The Black Cat*? From "The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little" (Levine 675) to "Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (Levine 676), you can see his guilt almost unfathomable, thinking he can get away with murdering his wife, but in the end, his superior complex ends up betraying him with his first crime coming back, literally, to haunt him. The ineptitude of Prospero's attitude in Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* thinking he could outrun Death? "With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion" (Levine 662) as Prince Prospero had no trouble closing the doors on the poor, thinking that steel walls of iron and bolts welded together could possibly prevent a plague from reaching inside. Or the foolish naivety that Goodman Brown possessed, shown in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, thinking everyone in his town was

innocent and guiltless, when in fact they all consorted with the Devil somehow, even finding his father and grandfather guilty of communing with the Devil? “They were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight. I would fain be friends with you, for their sake” (Levine 347). Brown, learning his own family partook in “nefarious” acts and realizing how “corrupt” his community were, I believe that this is what contributed to his dying alone and becoming isolated, judgemental and a harsher critic of what “true character” should have been.

Another concept that is somewhat overlooked, thinking it’s too simple to go in depth, is the idea of gothic settings between Poe and Hawthorne’s stories. Why did both authors’ writings end up biting their characters while realizing, a little too late, the consequences of their actions? Prince Prospero was dutifully negligent, aimed at spending fortunes to keep something out that ended up killing him in the end. With the character in *The Black Cat*, there are issues with recognizing the apparent abuse alcoholism and losing yourself can be when dealing with a downward spiral. This can also be demonstrated throughout *Young Goodman Brown’s* journey into the woods. While not dealing with alcoholism, Brown’s naive nature is enough to bring his pride to adulthood, while bringing down his own dealings with community members in his perception of their “ungodly” doings. All of these, while making a “true character” false in order to recognize the differences between right and wrong, help those who read them to think about future endeavors whilst making sure to avoid the same mistakes, historical traditions that are meant to inspire, not be repeated.

Works Cited

Levine, Robert S., et al. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature. 1820-1865*. 9th ed., B, W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.