

Edgar Allan Poe and His Refusal to Let Women Freely Indulge

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America is no stranger to alcohol. The early nineteenth century is well-known for an abundant consumption of liquor, however, both women and men had different experiences. Alcohol became very commonplace for men—a standard facet of everyday life, but for women, alcohol use was deplored. Edgar Allan Poe lived during the early nineteenth century, and the dramatic influence of alcohol can be detected through many of his written works. Many of Poe's pieces mirror nineteenth century American life flawlessly; stories such as "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," "King Pest," and "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether," are indicators that men are never criticized for their excessive alcohol consumption, excusing them of their actions with the notion of perverseness, while women are denied any excuse at all, being disparaged for excessively indulging in alcohol.

Sociological criticism and feminist critique pave the way for understanding why aspects in society tend to insert themselves within literature. Kenneth Burke, in his article, "Literature as Equipment for Living," relates sociological criticism in literature to proverbs, for both are strategies for handling conditions and are representative and repetitive within a social structure, thus people create strategies or attitudes to deal with those issues (595). Sociological criticism defines complex and sophisticated works as tools to aid in the discovery of important facts regarding "literary organization;" furthermore, this criticism observes issues beyond literature, extending to life itself, "helping to take literature out of its separate bin and give it a place in a general 'sociological' picture" (Burke 594-95). By examining written works, readers can analyze and identify facets of literature and connect it to that "sociological" canvas, relating the work to its society. Sociological criticism seeks to remain timeless, allowing situations to transcend through time, making them understandable and relatable to a wide audience (Burke 596). Thus, literature is like a piece of equipment for living, in which authors suggest different ways to deal with society's issues.

Feminist criticism ties into sociological criticism because both discuss key issues in literature and delineate those matters through society itself. One way in which feminist criticism works is that it "examines the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 83). Feminist criticism identifies aspects in literature that discuss women and how those features are linked to their struggle in a patriarchal society.

There are six premises that are utilized when critiquing literature, but those that apply to Poe's works focus on the social and psychological oppression of women due to patriarchy, the "otherness" of women, and gender issues that affect each part of "human production and experience" (Tyson 92). By utilizing these criticisms, Poe's works will prove to reflect society and life itself, in which women are oppressed and that the issue is ignored. It further highlights alcohol consumption and the condemnation cast onto women and the acceptance of male drinkers, justifying men's drunken wrongs through the notion of perverseness.

The early nineteenth century experienced an enormous amount of alcohol intake. Excessive use of alcohol was not, at the time, viewed as an addiction, but rather involved practical purposes. Pioneers in the Old West performed extremely physically demanding jobs; therefore, "[a]lcohol was consumed in large quantities to provide relaxation and a temporary escape from the harsh realities of living on the frontier" (Agnew 10). Because alcohol emits many chemical substances in the drinker's body, it was viewed as a fix-all that was capable of healing the drinker of any pains and ailments he/she faced. Many Americans also believed that alcohol, like whiskey, was required to provide the body with the vigor needed to complete those strenuous jobs and cure ailments such as sunstroke and hypothermia (Agnew 11). However, drinkers typically experienced sensations of power, so as they tried to increase euphoric sensations, they'd drink too much, resulting in impairment and aggression and ultimately led to altercations and gunfights in saloons (Agnew 25-6). Furthermore, according to Harry Gene Devine, temperance advocates became convinced that alcoholics were not immoral or savage, but ached with an "alcohol-induced disease" (Fisher 104). Alcohol thus became a type of medicine, healing men of their aching bodies and soothing their throbbing minds while feuds and mental maladies began to emerge.

Men weren't the only ones who indulged in alcohol. The American Temperance Society compiled data from the 1820s showing that "nine million women and children drank 12 million gallons of distilled spirits[;]" however, this did not nearly match the three million men drinking sixty million gallons (Rorabough 11). While there were a larger amount of female and children drinkers, the amount of alcohol intake was relatively low in comparison to a smaller amount of men, drinking 48 million more gallons. Thus, indicating a wider acceptance of male drinkers indulging in large amounts, while many women drank minute portions. Regardless of these numbers, women were expected to remain sober in order to maintain their required feminine characters, which may also indicate why there were so many who did drink, but drank very little. In *The Alcoholic Republic*, W.J. Rorabough states, "The ideal of femininity did discourage tipping, for a woman was supposed to show restraint consistent with virtue, prudence consonant with delicacy, and a preference

for beverages agreeable to a fragile constitution" (12). This harsh necessity of feminine life suppressed women, leading them to other drugs with similar effects. Women began drinking alcohol-based medicines deemed "cordial or stomachic elixir[s,]" while remaining in the confinement of their homes in order to preserve their image projected by social expectations (Rorabough 12-13). The denial of women drinking alcohol in public disgraced those who did drink, and the same shame that existed in real life for female alcohol drinkers transmits into Poe's literature fiercely.

"The Black Cat" describes a tale of an imprisoned narrator, who, while under the influence of alcohol, kills his pet cat, Pluto, and later kills his wife. It is a significant story, supporting the belief that men are never criticized or condemned for their alcohol use, regardless of how tragic their offenses may be. The narrator first admits his alcoholism in the beginning of the story: "But my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol!" (Poe 350). Through all of the narrator's savage acts, he justifies his actions with perverseness: "Perverseness is one of my primitive impulses of the human heartone of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man ... It was the unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself to offer violence to its own natureto do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (Poe 350). The narrator asserts that perverseness is an innate characteristic of man, justifying that his wrongs were committed solely because he knew they were wrong. This "deliberate seeking out of that which the narrator knows to be 'vile'" (Warner 81), is the narrator's excuse for the murders. However, alcohol truly sparks that "innate" behavior. Alcohol is a "destructive instrument, ravaging heart and intellect and leading to complete moral and psychological ruin" (Warner 82). The narrator in "The Black Cat" implies that alcohol is his disease, but perverseness overwhelms the tale, leaving readers to believe that the narrator's human nature created a slippery slope sending him from humanity, to alcohol, to crime, then to punishment—not his derangement or drunkenness. Thus, readers do not condemn the narrator, but rather condemn human weakness masked by perverseness for leading him on his destructive path. In reality, perverseness is a man's excuse to excessively drink and escape consequences.

Another perverse tale, "The Cask of Amontillado" describes Montresor, a man overly committed to his family's motto, "[N]o one offends me with impunity" (Poe 418). He seeks revenge on Fortunato for an unnamed wrong, luring his friend to a lavish wine-tasting as part of a trick in his murderous plot. Montresor convinces the reader that his crime is justified, for "[t]he thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (Poe 415). Throughout the story, Montresor refers to Fortunato as his "friend," all while planning and executing his breathing burial as an act of revenge, a clear acknowledgement that his cruel deed

is unlawful, but justifies it through perverseness. He is aware of his unlawful act, convincingly stricken by human nature; however, he is truly thrust into his act by alcohol: "The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc" (Poe 418). Both connoisseurs of fine wine, the two drank as friends would, devouring the liquid. Montresor's acknowledgement of his evil act becomes apparent toward the end of the story when a "succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated, I trembled" (Poe 420). His hesitation indicates his wrongdoing, but he remembers his act of vengeance is the code of honor in his family, so he buries his friend alive. Perverseness is suggested to overwhelm him as he needed to live out his family's maxim, however, killing his friend and knowing it was wrong makes alcohol the true source of his impunity.

Next, "King Pest" highlights the ridicule and subjection that women face while consuming alcohol. Two sailors spend the night drinking in a desolate pub and decide to venture into the streets of London later finding themselves in an undertaker's building where people are found drinking in merriment. The six drinkers are described throughout the story, and here is where the women are cast as "other," while patriarchy ensues, offering the men miniscule critique. There are four men; King Pest is described as "emaciated" and his eyes "were glazed over with the fumes of intoxication," (Poe 152-3). The second man is described as "gouty" whose "cheeks reposed upon the shoulders of their owner, like two huge bladders of Oporto wine" (Poe 154). The third man is described as a man who convulses with tremors whenever alcohol sounded. The last man was never discussed in regards to his alcohol consumption. The characterizations of the men are general descriptions compared to the otherness of the women. The women in "King Pest" are physically hideous and drunk (Warner 73). The first is described as having "no right to complain of his unnatural emaciation. She was evidently in the last stage of dropsy [or unquenchable thirst]; and her figure resembled nearly that of the huge puncheon of October beer which stood, with the head driven in, close by her side" (Poe 153). The second woman was "trembling of her wasted fingers, in the livid hue of her lips, and in the slight hectic spot which tinged her otherwise leaden complexion, gave evident indications of a galloping consumption" (Poe 153-4). Through Poe's descriptions, women are described much harsher than their male counterparts. The features focused on of the men are cheeks or eyes or compelled convulsions that the character cannot control. As for the women, the commentary indicates that they are grotesque due to their alcohol consumption in comparison to men who are drunk, but distorted for other reasons. In addition, many saloons of the nineteenth century were also a primary target for men looking for willing women (Agnew 134). The women's modesty is questioned when

they are carried away to the sailors' ship, called the "Free and Easy," suggesting those women are just that. The two sailors are also distorted in size and shape, but are never belittled because they drink. Just as women were highly criticized for their "public indecency" of drinking, expected to maintain their femininity, the women in "King Pest" are mocked all the same.

The final story, "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether," follows a male narrator as he visits a mental institution to learn about the "system of soothing" (Poe, "The System"). While at the institution, he dines with Monsieur Maillard, the doctor, and the lunatics (patients), indulging in fine food and wine. All of the lunatics seem a bit mad, while the way in which the women are discussed indicates their otherness and the prevailing power of patriarchy, for they are seen as either ideal or lacking what is expected of their gender. The first female the narrator meets is the doctor's niece, a "most accomplished woman" (Poe, "The System"), who, when alcohol was served to the men, chose to delicately remove herself rather than revel in the drink a true "lady." As dinner ensued, once a woman decided to chime in, the host angrily reprimanded her: "Madame Joyeuse, I will thank you to behave yourself! You can either conduct yourself as a lady should do, or you can quit the table forthwith-take your choice" (Poe, "The System"). This drunken female acts as insane as the men; however, the host decides to only chide her. As the entire dinner falls apart, the narrator makes a comment on the same woman, pitying her for her deplorable behavior, but he never pities the men who circle around him in their lunacy: "Madame Joyeuse, I really could have wept for the poor lady, she appeared so terribly perplexed. All she did, however, was to stand up in a corner, by the fireplace, and sing out incessantly at the top of her voice, 'Cock-a-doodle-de-dooooooh!'" (Poe, "The System"). Even though the men are acting just as manic as the woman, satiating themselves in wine, only the female is lectured and admonished. As Karen Weekes states in her article, "Poe's Feminine Ideal," "Once a woman steps out of the narrow boundaries of the stereotypical feminine role, she is reviled rather than revered" (154). These women are vilified, for they satisfy their thirst with liquor and abandon their expected feminine roles. Furthermore, a woman "who has the poor grace to show the ravages of disease is to be eschewed, as she is merely a token of inevitable decay without the redeeming virtue of impregnable beauty" (Weekes 154). Alcohol is the inflicting disease that allows patriarchy to rule over women and reject them as "other," for once she revokes her ideal feminine qualities, she is unable to redeem herself, falling further into contempt.

These analyses lead us to the question: Why are men allowed to drink, facing little to no ridicule if they commit unlawful acts, while women are belittled for merely reveling in liquor? Many may argue that this is a

simple literary technique Poe implemented. Every work is subject to multiple interpretations, and because we are not privy to Poe's thoughts, it is up to critics to apply the foundation of their beliefs to these stories in an attempt to discover possible reasons behind certain aspects. For sociological criticism, the narrator in "The Black Cat" and Montresor revel in alcohol as males did in the 1800s. Not only was it typical of males to drink, but it was also usual to exude bad behavior while drinking – both of these factors are recognized in Poe's tales. In the last two stories, the women are portrayed as "other"; the men in those tales, delegates of patriarchy, jeer women who drink, while excusing men for their own drunken behaviour, a common facet of the 1800s. Just like many other writers at this time, "Poe could present women who drink more than an occasional sip only as comic or repulsive or both" (Warner 73). The western world is highly patriarchal; women faced much inequality throughout the centuries and still do, proving that gender issues transcend through time within one particular place. Women freely indulge today, however, there are still many unequal conditions between the two sexes, making these tales relatable and educational, showing us what was wrong in society, while shining light on possible inaccuracies today. Patriarchy oppressed women socially and psychologically, denying them rights that men had, clearly eminent in Poe's works. This gender issue induces different experiences with "human production and experience" (Tyson 92). The women in these tales are oppressed socially and psychologically as their alcohol consumption is chastised, forcing a different relationship with alcohol: women cannot drink merrily, and should expect ridicule if they do, while men can satisfy their thirst and escape punishment for executed crimes because of this unstable liquid.

Edgar Allan Poe provides multiple sketches of male and female characters consuming alcohol. Perverseness may not run rampant through all his works, nor will this finite characterization of these particular women; however, in the tales described above, we clearly see men granted the right to drink and act freely, while women who quench their thirst on such substances are scorned, dismantling their reputation. These works reflect Poe's society where alcohol was a man's drink, while women were expected to remain dainty and pure. Women are either ridiculed or suffer sad fates; men have all of the power and women are just along for the ride. Women are denied pure enjoyment in the drink, while alcohol allows men to be miscreants with no remorse who harbor only power and vigor and blame their illegal actions on perverseness. These issues are indicative of feminist and sociological criticism based on works such as these that undermine the oppression of women and reflect Poe's society, as well as being capable of transcending to modern day in which similar issues are still emblematic.

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