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**How Utterly Thou Hast Murdered Thyself:
Poe's Comedic Double-Take in "William Wilson"**

About the author

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe remains best known around the world for his haunting poems and eerie tales of Gothic horror and mystery. But Poe is also a writer of comic literature, and his entire oeuvre—including the well-known tales of terror—is suffused with elements of satire, hoax, and humor. Poe is a practical joker, and frequently the joke is on us, the readers, rather than on any particular character in his tales. So it is with Poe's paradigmatic *Doppelgänger* story, "William Wilson," in which the narrator is haunted by his mysterious double until he can take it no more. As in the comedian's slang ("I kill myself"), in the end, the author may have the last laugh, and the risibility of the terror becomes evident once the reader recognizes his or her own satirized doubling. The essay explores the interweaving of the comic and the violent in Poe's satirical *Doppelgänger* narrative.

Keywords

Poe, Edgar Allan; Satire; Doppelgänger; Narrative Forms; Literary Theory; Fantasy

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Although he remains best known for tales of Gothic horror or mystery, Edgar Allan Poe’s overall *oeuvre* is suffused with a tone of satire, prankishness, and humor. Indeed, one might characterize Poe’s work as essentially comic, and the violence and terror associated with so many of his best known tales are frequently part of the joke, although the joke may most likely be on us, the readers, rather than on any of the characters in the tales. So it is with Poe’s paradigmatic *Doppelgänger* story, “William Wilson,” in which the narrator who has seemingly been plagued by his mysterious double at last stabs his enemy with a rapier. Upon expiring, Wilson—or is it the narrator himself?—declares that, in the image of his death, the murderer can see “how utterly thou hast murdered thyself” (1984b, 357; hereinafter cited by page number). As in the comedian’s slang phrase, “I kill myself,” this may indicate the risibility of the scene, as the *peripeteia* of a murder-that-turns-out-to-be-a-suicide is really a kind of practical joke. The reader may not be laughing, but Poe surely is.

Poe’s work is grounded in an aggressively comic mode, but as Tom Quirk has argued, this does not necessarily mean that Poe’s humor is funny (see 2001, 53–63). Poe’s most frequent tone is one of mockery, and his laughter often seems at our own expense. Although Poe’s mockery may not be entirely as mean-spirited as Quirk supposes, his barbs at the literati of New York and, more pointedly, at the pop

philosophers of “Frogpondium” (Poe’s derisively humorous term for Boston, which has a famous Frog Pond in its Boston Common public park) are rather sharp at times. In his hoaxes, which arguably include a good many tales and sketches not usually counted among his intentional “hoaxes,” Poe is clearly poking fun at the readers themselves, delighting in “putting one over” on them. However, Poe’s laughter also carries with it the jubilation of the critic, a kind of delight in sending up the self-satisfied or uncritical assumptions permeating the mainstream culture of those places, while also laden with a small tinge of melancholy at the recognition that such satirical critique is all-too-needed in one’s own world. It is the laughter of Nietzsche, who writes in the opening lines of *The Twilight of the Idols* that “maintaining cheerfulness in the midst of a gloomy affair, fraught with immeasurable responsibility, is no small feat; and yet, what is needed more than cheerfulness? Nothing succeeds if prankishness has no part in it” (1982, 465). Poe’s is a prankish sort of criticism, a jocular kind of underground rumbling, that can remind us of alternative ways of looking at the American literature and culture frequently taken for granted. As I have argued elsewhere, the subterranean noises of Poe’s work are like that strange music, faintly heard, emanating from another, seemingly fantastic world, but which aids us in thinking differently about our own real world.

As a master of the forms of Gothic sensationalism, Poe expertly blends the comically absurd with the most gut-wrenchingly violent imagery, as when the narrator of “Berenice” extracts the teeth from his still-living but prematurely interred love, to take a particularly gruesome example. Poe was also an adept at gauging the public appetites for such fare; in response to his editor’s dismay at how “horrible” the tale was, Poe argued those magazines which were successful published work “similar in nature” to “Berenice,”

and that such nature consisted in “the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical” (see Ostrom 1948, 57). In each of these elements, Poe makes clear that *excess*—perhaps *doubling* the initial sensation to produce ever greater effects in the reader—is the key to successfully capturing the attention of the audience. Poe gleefully ventures *extra moenia flammantia mundi* (as Walter Scott, playfully using a phrase from Lucretius, once warned writers against moving) into a realm of fantasy. Poe’s doubling down on the perceived limit of “good taste” in his most famous stories is a mark of his own comic sensibilities, as the laughter with which once encounters a transgression is only possible once one has identified, and then crossed over, the boundary.

Poe also frequently employs the gothic figure of the *Doppelgänger*, most directly visible in “William Wilson,” but also throughout his *oeuvre*. One thinks of the double-characterization of Roderick and Madeleine Usher, for instance, or the ghostly doublings in “Morella” or “Ligeia.” Amid the horror of these tales, Poe also seems to be having some fun with the reader, and I would argue that Poe’s use of the “double” and his literary practice of “doubling” is an means of intensifying the comic aspects of his violent and terrifying work. “William Wilson” provides an exquisite case study.

“William Wilson” is based on a sketchy outline of a tale by Washington Irving, another humorist whose comedy often involves of touch of violence—think of Ichabod Crane fleeing the headless horseman, for example. In that version, a masked man haunts the footsteps of the increasingly agitated protagonist; at the climactic moment, the protagonist stabs his persecutor and, removing the mask, discovers his own face staring

back at him. Irving concludes that story, which is titled “An Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron,” by inviting “a poet or dramatist of the Byron school” to write the tale, an invitation Poe clearly accepted, as he notes in a letter (along with a copy of “William Wilson”) to Irving in 1839. Given this pre-history, one might say that the story is already a “doubling” of a tale that may have been known to others in Poe’s original audience, and the reference to Byron adds another double, insofar as the narrator or William Wilson is suggestive of the Byronic hero or villain. The redoubled duplication involving Irving’s own retelling of a Spanish drama makes the narrative itself a kind of garden of forking paths, in which all possibilities seem open, but where the ascertainable meaning seems foreclosed in advance.

In Poe’s version of the tale, “William Wilson” presents itself as mysterious fantasy in which the reader is made to feel perplexed from the outset. Beginning with the dual identification and non-identification of the narrator, who provisionally introduces himself with a pseudonym, the obscuring of personal identity in the tale continues to mystify by oscillating between at least two identities: the two William Wilsons. This actually raises a double-*Doppelgänger* question, since the reader is invited to associate the narrator with the “real” William Wilson who is plagued by his double, but the reader is also made aware of the inconsistencies in the narrator’s story, allowing one to doubt exactly who is the double and who is the original. Indeed, as I suggest below, the *mise en abyme* of the tale renders the narrative inscrutable.

“William Wilson” may be summarized briefly. Two introductory paragraphs seems to provide a rationale for the storytelling, explaining why this narrator would tell the story, but these paragraphs also serve to obscure the reality even further.

Paradoxically, the very paragraphs that would establish the authority of the narrator and commend the reader to believe the tale are the ones that begin to undermine his narrative. As in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” in which the obviously insane narrator pleads with the reader to recognize his sanity, the narrator of “William Wilson” undermines his own narrative and authority even as he establishes his narrative voice, as one can discern in the opening lines. “Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation” (337). First, by invoking and then providing a false name, the narrator introduces deceit from the very beginning of the tale. The name *William Wilson* is thus a sign, but one that signifies an absence in the text. The real person who would appear to be relating important events from his own biography remains cloaked. Moreover, since this narrative is intended to solicit the reader’s belief, the unreliability of the narrative itself becomes part of the joke. Poe is playing with the reader in simultaneously inviting and rebuffing their credulity. “William Wilson” is not just a tale of a double, but one of duplicity itself.

The narrator endeavors to explain the origin of his “later years of unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime,” and although he will not describe any aspect of that “turpitude,” he explains his desire to expose its source. In his untrustworthy narrative, the reader is urged to understand the source of his bad behavior in what will be revealed only in the closing lines of the story. Thus, the main body of the tale, which elaborates the narrator’s early life and encounters with his mysterious *Doppelgänger*, is really all prologue to the real immorality left unexposed. Hence, even the confessional nature of the story is a joke; the narrator does not confess anything, but rather weaves a tale that will explain in advance those crimes that must remain unknown. Another doubling,

where the meaning of the “turpitude” is forever deferred or displaced, located in a parallel world just outside of the text itself.

Famously, the narrator is plagued by the appearance at his school of another boy who shares his name, his date of birth, his approximate height and build—in other words, this second Wilson is his double. Perplexingly, the narrator concedes that no one else at his school noticed the resemblance, so the reader is invited to doubt the existence of the *Doppelgänger* (at least, his existence *as* a “double”) from the start. The narrator is vexed by a sense of Wilson’s superiority, but his “real feelings towards him [...] formed a motley and heterogeneous admixture—some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity” (343). One night, the narrator creeps in Wilson’s bedchamber to execute some malicious practical joke when he is struck by Wilson’s apparently identical aspect to his own, and he flees the room and the academy forever. In the course of the remainder of the story, we see three key incidents in which Wilson thwarts the narrator’s wishes. First, as a student at Eton, the narrator is interrupted by Wilson’s mysteriously appearance just as he was engaged in a wild debauchery. Then, at Oxford, while the narrator is trying to cheat in a card game, Wilson’s ghostly voice reveals the truth of the scam, forcing the narrator to flee. Now on the continent, the narrator briefly mentions a number of similar episodes before describe the final scene, in which he attempts to seduce a nobleman’s wife in Rome, when Wilson once more interferes; dragging him into a cloakroom, the narrator stabs his persecutor. For a slight moment, confusing what seems to be a mirror image with the scene before him, the narrator is alarmed by his own bloody countenance, but discovers that Wilson, now unmasked, is indeed his identical double. Wilson gets the

final word before dying, however, by stating that his death is really the narrator's own: "*In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself*" (357).

For the reader, confusion persists throughout the story of "William Wilson." If nobody else notices the second Wilson as a double, or even as a rival, then is all of this in the narrator's head? Does the second Wilson even exist, or is he simply a metaphor, the personification of the narrator's conscience? Could this tale, like so many in Poe's *oeuvre*, be another joke, a prank upon the too gullible audience of the day? Susan Amper has suggested that this tale, like such murderer's narratives as "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," or "The Imp of the Perverse," is really a case of the lying (or duplicitous?) narrator, who clearly killed someone back at Dr. Bransby's Manor School and who has continued a kind of crime spree ever since (see Amper 2001, 170–211). Is this a more straightforward tale of a violent psychopath, who seeks to cover his tracks with an outlandish alibi, or a lampoon of the Gothic *Doppelgänger* genre?

The question of genre seems part of the joke in Poe's frequent use of comical violence, as readers cannot quite tell what is expected, so they do not know whether to laugh or cry. Aside from the more commonly understood genres like romance or realism, or even Poe's own tales of the grotesque and arabesque, one can discern a basic ambiguity in nearly all of Poe's narratives that may be illustrated by thinking of the voices who tell the stories. In most cases, the narrator is extremely serious and apparently forthright, but also refers to things that we are not accustomed to taking seriously. Frequently, this introduces a level of absurdity into the tale. The narrators of many of these short stories are earnest, yet they cannot be considered wholly trustworthy.

Jonathan Arac has pointed out the “pseud earnestness” of Poe’s narrators, who recount their experiences with the utmost gravity and solemnity, even where the events of the plot are utterly absurd or unbelievable. This places the careful reader in an awkward position. “Was this pseud earnestness the narrator’s self-delusion, the author’s wish to delude the reader, or play in which all parties shared? Readers were confident in laughing at southwestern humor, and Hawthorne’s complex ironies only emphasized his thoughtfulness, but Poe’s work provoked fundamental uncertainty in response. Was he serious? Should his readers be serious? The problem is one of genre: What kind of work is this?” (2005, 68). This question certainly applies to “William Wilson.”

In a review of Poe’s 1845 *Tales*—a review likely written, at least in part, by Poe himself—Poe is praised for his meticulous clarity and force of his short fiction and for his “earnest” style. “There is often a minuteness of detail; but on examination it will always be found that this minuteness was necessary to the developement [*sic*] of the plot, the effects, or the incidents. His style may be called, strictly, an earnest one” (1984a, 873). However, this earnestness derives, not from the actual sincerity or seriousness of the author, but from his ability to *simulate* earnestness. “A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or he must simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of his reader. That power of simulation can only be possessed by a man of high genius” (1984a, 873). The mark of the writer’s sincerity is his talent for pretending to be sincere, but then this is a talent well suited to the confidence man, the card sharp, the seducer—a narrator like that of “William Wilson,” to be sure. Maybe Poe’s point is just another way of saying that fiction is more capable of arriving at the truth than the mere recitation of facts, but it also suggests that the measure of a great artist

(“a man of high genius”) is his capacity to successfully deceive others. This is a perverse image of the literary artist, but one which suits Poe’s earthy, subterranean sense of humor.

In tales such as “William Wilson,” Poe summons a demon that he would later name the *imp of the perverse*. Poe’s perversity is certainly visible in the psychological phenomenon he identifies as perverseness, in which one (sometimes consciously and deliberately) acts against one’s own interest and better judgement so as to vex oneself, to thwart one’s own desires, or to amplify one’s own pain (see 1984b, 827). But one may also find the spirit of the perverse operating in Poe’s peculiar approach to his craft, an approach that often prevents the author from making that communicative bond with the reader which would engender understanding and empathy. Poe’s writing is itself perverse. In many of Poe’s short works, not only is the reader left baffled or uncertain, but the reader is also occasionally subjected to mockery and abuse. Sometimes the reader may share in the joke, as when Poe invites the audience to recognize the satire of others (for instance, in “The Man That Was Used Up,” which pokes fun at both the celebration of war heroes and absurdities of the gossip mongers). At other times, the reader is him- or herself the butt of the joke, most obviously in something like “The Balloon-Hoax,” an elaborate practical joke involving a complicit newspaper publisher and an author’s healthy disdain for the public. Even in those tales that were not designed as hoaxes, like “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” or “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe delighted in “putting one over” on gullible readers. More generally, Poe’s theory of what makes fiction or poetry a success also calls for the reader to be manipulated by the author; the reader is to be held captive, and the author generates sensations and engineers

effects according to the author's own designs. Notwithstanding the sheer pleasure of reading experienced by so many in Poe's vast audience, the readers of Poe's tales are frequently his victims.

An apt figure for the overall narrative game being played upon the reader in "William Wilson" might be found in the narrator's curious description of Dr. Bransby's school itself.

But the house! — how quaint an old building was this! — to me how veritably a palace of enchantment! There was really no end to its windings — to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable — inconceivable — and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different from those with which we pondered upon infinity. During the five years of my residence here, I was never able to ascertain with precision, in what remote locality lay the little sleeping apartment assigned to myself and some eighteen or twenty other scholars. (340)

The mysteriously unmappable space might be said to represent the narrative space of the tale itself, since the reader is forced to map the contours of a tale in which the narrator, and perhaps author, seems intent of obscuring. One finds a mixture of humor and terror in the image of a schoolboy who gets lost in his own school. Not knowing where he is at any given moment, the boy must project an imaginary cartography in order to acquire the desired orientation and to know his place. In performing this kind of cognitive mapping, the narrator calls upon not so much spatial analysis (which, in any case, is lacking in the text itself) as a kind of moral geography, in which his own actions can be situated in a recognizable environment of good and bad, right and wrong. But the boy in question in

“William Wilson” navigates the space quite well (as he notes in his ability to steal “through a wilderness of narrow passages” to find Wilson’s bedroom [346]); it is the reader who is comically, and terrifyingly, lost in this tale of violence and duplicity.

The appearance of the mirror in the final scene causes a momentary confusion, and it adds to the overall practical joke of “William Wilson.” After repeatedly stabbing Wilson with his sword, the narrator briefly turns away to lock the door; then looking upon the scene afresh, he sees himself, bloody and staggering towards him: “The brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror—so at first it seemed to me in my confusion—now stood where none had been perceptible before; and, as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait” (356). The insertion of the mirror into the “arrangements of the room” would be comical, even in its macabre depiction of the gory self-image lurching towards the murderer. The notion of the infinite regression of identical images, the *mise en abyme*, is raised in the narrator’s vision of himself at this moment and of the story, as the narrator doubles himself in the narration, and the reader cannot be certain of who is who at any given moment.. But, of course, there is no mirror. The narrator continues: “Thus it appeared I say, but was not” (356). This reintroduces the *Doppelgänger* story, allowing a physically identical Wilson to address the narrator, but the line also speaks for the story as a whole. “Thus it appeared I say, but was not” is a caveat applicable to “William Wilson” in general. Here is a final duplicity, a doubling that renders the most violent scene of the tale a comical one as well, as Poe plays a last trick upon the reader.

An addition duplicity emerges from the tale. In his playful use of the double, Poe also doubles himself, presenting another “Poe” who becomes a means of satire. This refers not merely to the doubles in some stories (like William Wilson, the revenant Ligeia, or the white shrouded figure who looms at the end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*), but also to the doubling of the author. One thinks of Jorge Luis Borges’s fable, “Borges and I,” depicting the eerie uncertainties of a writer seeking to avoid himself, discovering that “my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him” (1964, 246). Borges concludes this parable by saying that “I do not know which of us has written this page” (1964, 247), a haunting return to a situation not unlike that of the narrator of “William Wilson.” In both his fictional doubles and his own doubled-self, Poe offers a combination of comedy and terror that satirizes both, while also promulgating new literary forms and novel approaches to understanding them.

As I have suggested, this double-Poe reveals itself in Poe’s work in the form of a practical joke. Or, to use an even more precise term from Poe’s *corpus*, a “diddle.” In “Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences,” Poe notes that the final and essential element if every diddle (that is, prank or confidence game) is the grin: “Your *true* diddler winds up all with a grin. But this nobody sees but himself.” Poe concludes, “a diddle would be *no* diddle without a grin” (1984b, 609). At the end of the comically violent *Doppelgänger* tale of “William Wilson,” it may be Poe who wears the diddler’s grin, while the readers are left to scratch their heads.

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