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Madness in "The Black Cat"

Is there really a concrete description of madness? There are so many different people who are labeled under such a category of "madness" that there is actually an unclear meaning of madness. From the mentally ill to con men, both are all labeled under "mad." Many could argue whether or not the "conmen" from Michael DePorte's "Madness and Masquerade" were actually sane, or was it all simply part of their massive scheme to avoid jail time. Then for the main character from "The Black Cat" by Edgar Allan Poe, was normal at first but then he blames his actions all on alcohol. What is the difference between pleading insanity and saying that their action were because they were under the influence? In reality there are not so many differences. However both have one thing in common. Both can legally avoid punishment because both involves people who cannot distinguish whether their actions were right or wrong. In "The Black Cat", the protagonist has a violent mental illness that results in his physical abuse of his wife and pets throughout the short story. Whether he was really under the influence of alcohol or was he really just mad. Some parts in "Madness and Masquerade" would possibly help understand the protagonist's insanity more. Whether it was already in his personality and just needed to be let out, or completely going insane from the constant reminders of his guilt, or even simply he was under the influence are all related back to how he ended up going insane.

First, in “The Black Cat” by Edgar Allan Poe, was a first person narrative about the protagonist who suffered from drug abuse. Which then lead to physical violence as he was under the influence. The alcohol alone wouldn’t cause a completely sane man to go insane. The insanity in his violent behavior that appeared near the second end of the short story possibly was already there. It just never had a chance to show themselves. Until alcohol lowered his consciousness which allowed this second more violent personality of his come out. This could relate back to “Madness and Masquerade” when Deporte mentions Hamlet (Deporte 638). Hamlet puts on an antic disposition to avenge his father. Yet he got so into his act, he started going insane. To the point where no one can tell whether it was an act or not. He killed Polonius who he mistaken to be Claudius yet he showed no emotion. He killed his ex-girlfriend’s father and all he offered was an apology afraid his cover may be blown. Once Hamlet and the protagonist from “The Black Cat” were exposed to their hidden self that was sealed away. Both were completely overtaken by the second personality. Now focusing back onto the protagonist of *The Black Cat*, who seems to suffer from multiple personality disorder and bipolar disorder. Another disorder can be depression because he came back one night and abused all his pets and his wife because they seemed to ignore him. Since depression is a feeling of severe despondency and dejection this makes the protagonist want attention. However because everyone around him is “avoiding” him, this led him to project his anger onto his surroundings. Which he chose, the people and animals that “avoided” him. Even though in reality, the people and animals around him were actually afraid of him, because he was so violent. This short story “The Black Cat” is like a way Poe is telling his own story. In Edgar Allan Poe’s work, some referenced neurological diseases. Which he suffered from, “recurrent depression, bipolar disorder, as well as alcohol and

drug abuse, which in fact led to his death from complications related to alcoholism.” according to Scielo.br.

Second, after the protagonist of “The Black Cat” hanged his first cat and burnt his house down this made him upset that he killed his beloved cat. Which resulted in him trying to find another cat that resembled the same cat. Yet the difference between them were that the first cat was all black as the second had a white patch covering its breast. This white patch on the second cats breast can symbolize purity. The first encounter the protagonist had with the cat, the cat seemed to walk up to the protagonist and showed attachment. However the following paragraph then says how the protagonist disliked the fondness and was rather disgusted by it. “I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it” (Poe 9). This cat symbolizes purity, because it reminded the protagonist of how pure he once was, before being contaminated by his violent nature. Even reminding him of the source of his “simplest and purest pleasures.” However because of this “beast” as the protagonist calls it, he was disgusted by how it reminded him of his guilt, which ultimately ended in the death of the animal. This relating to “Madness and Masquerade” quoted “Each attempt to escape defeat on the wings of a splendid new identity” (Deporte 642). Where the protagonist of “The Black Cat” started new. He got a new cat and left all of his past to start new and in a way took on a new identity. However his downfall was because he didn’t completely let go of his past and got a cat that closely resembled his old cat which reminded him constantly of his crimes. Ending in his own insanity where the constant reminder of his crimes, made history repeat itself.

Also, in the third paragraph of “Madness and Masquerade”, talks about a trial in 1843 which many would still argue, whether Daniel McNaughtan was truly insane. McNaughtan shot and killed Sir Robert Peel’s secretary who he mistook for the prime minister himself (Deporte 637). During McNaughtan’s trial, he claims that there was a voice in his head which didn’t leave him alone and continuously harassed him. At the end McNaughtan wins the trial with his lawyer saying “he is as mad as a hatter and shouldn’t be held responsible.” Even with the multiple instances of McNaughtan’s past, where he had taken courses in natural philosophy which most certainly had included study of mental disorder. Many would still argue he got away with the insanity plea and was faking madness. Tying back to “The Black Cat”, possibly both McNaughtan and the protagonist of “The Black Cat” had a piece of insanity within them. Except one, let their insanity run free under the influence of alcohol as the other executed an entire assassination and got away with it. Even though they may have been completely sane as some may argue. Which sane man, would plan out an assassination just to kill a prime minister? Some evidence even points to McNaughtan as an assassin. When McNaughtan was arrested, he had a bank receipt of £750 which is around a quarter of a million dollars modern day and was even part of a secret political group. Which would explain why he wanted to assassinate the prime minister. As in “The Black Cat” the protagonist killed his wife and plastered her behind the walls of his house. He was so insane to the point where he just had to brag about how well of a plan he had to get away with murder.

At the end of “The Black Cat” after the police finished searching the protagonist’s home for his missing wife. The protagonist purposely points out how well the house was designed and constructed. Even to the point of tapping the place where his wife is hidden. This is kind of

narcissistic which if he had not said anything he would've gotten away with the crime. However he was full of himself and his "perfect" plan that he just had to tell someone of it. Which happened to be the police that were informed of his "perfect" plan. It was so bizarre that even a few days after his wife was killed and the police found her decaying body. The protagonist hears a sobbing of a child which is followed by a long and loud scream from behind the walls (Poe 14). A corpse that had been killed days ago and plasters into a wall for sure cannot make such noise. Which could've been entirely part of the protagonist's hallucination and everything was in his head. Or even could be a part of his sanity kicking in making him feel the guilt of killing his wife. Quoted in "Madness and Masquerade," "Madness sometimes resembles an unsuccessful con" (Deporte 642). This quote is proven by the protagonist in "The Black Cat", because if the narrator got away with the crime, it would've been a successful con. However because he was mad, it became an unsuccessful con since he was caught by his madness.

To summarize, both the protagonist from "The Black Cat", and the characters from "Madness and Masquerade" many share similar mental illnesses and cases. They were all insane, or had a piece of insanity in them waiting for the right moment to come out. Once out, their madness is what gets the best of them and ultimately resulting in their tragedy. Even though the main thing that released the protagonist's insanity was alcohol. There were many other instances that added to his insanity, such as the constant reminder of his crimes, and "voices" in his head that made him think people were avoiding him. As in "Madness and Masquerade" Hamlet was so into his act that the character he was acting became part of him. The people who were convicted of murder used the insanity plea and got away with murder by claiming to hear "voices" that demanded their actions. Whether the people from "Madness and Masquerade" were really insane

or if alcohol really was the reason why the protagonist of “The Black Cat” acted the way he was, there really is no proving if it was true or it was a con. Guess it shall forever remain a mystery.

Works Cited

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