# "Outcast of All Outcasts": The Doppelganger in Poe's "William Wilson"

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe was influenced by the darker side of German idealism, which was in fashion in America during the early 19th century as a result of the emergence of the Transcendental movement. The genesis for Poe's short story, "William Wilson," comes from a sketch by Washington Irving. Poe enlarges the brief sketch into a story that focuses on the duality of humanity by use of the motif of the doppelganger, which was developed by Germanic writers who sought to explore duality in an individual. Critics have discussed the doppelganger in Poe's short story "William Wilson," but many have overlooked how the tradition of German idealism influenced Poe's story. This essay explores Poe's use of the traditional role of displacement, repetition, ego and alter-ego, and other aspects of the doppelganger as a theme of German idealism throughout "William Wilson." Poe's innovation in "William Wilson" is his depiction of the doppelganger, which Poe uses as a corrective force to the narrator's evil. Incorporating the German tradition into a reading of "William Wilson" shows how Poe effectively uses the tradition to create a story that explores the duality of the human conscience.

In 1836, Washington Irving contributed a sketch to the publication *The Gift* detailing a poem that Lord Byron was contemplating but never wrote. The sketch, "An Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron," concerns a Spanish nobleman, Alfonso who, entering upon, "the career of life," has been plagued by the "unrestrained indulgence" of his youth (Irving 13). Alfonso finds himself followed in public by a person "masked and muffled," but he pays little attention to the figure (13). Over time, Alfonso grows irritated with the mysterious figure who seemingly is able to understand his thoughts. This figure appears when spoken of, and his presence is felt by Alfonso whenever the figure is thought of. Soon, the figure becomes an obsession to Alfonso, and his "youth, health, wealth, [and] power" begin to lose their "charm" (15). Alfonso pursues the figure to the house of his mistress and stabs the figure with a sword. The mask falls off the figure to reveal it is Alfonso, a "spectre of himself," who promptly dies with horror (15). Irving claimed that the sketch was communicated to Captain Thomas Medwin by Lord Byron, who found the idea in a Spanish play called *Embozado*, or the *Encapotado* (16). It was thought to be written by Pedro Calderón de la Barca but unavailable in public libraries, private collections, or even booksellers. Irving ends his sketch by suggesting that a "poet or dramatist of the Byron school" would find it a rich theme to pursue (17). Edgar Allan Poe contributed to that same publication of *The Gift* with his story "MS Found in a Bottle," so he certainly would have been aware of the challenge issued by Irving (10).

The challenge would be answered by Poe in his story "William Wilson," which appeared in 1839 in an issue of *Burton's Gentleman Magazine* and was subsequently featured in the 1840 Christmas edition of *The Gift*. Poe had been in contact with Irving in 1836. He wrote a letter to Irving asking for a contribution for the "sake of Virginian Literature" to the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Poe to Irving, June 7, 1836). Poe would follow that letter up in October of 1839 with another letter to Irving with "William Wilson" included. In this letter, Poe gives Irving the credit for the idea and even states that Irving has a "right of ownership" in the story (Poe to Irving, October 12, 1839). At the time, Poe considered "William Wilson" his "best effort" and hoped that Irving might appreciate the story enough to write some words of praise to be included in Poe's forthcoming two-volume collection of tales. Irving responded to Poe the next month, after some delay due to a wrong address and "procrastination" on the part of Irving, saying that "William Wilson" was "highly picturesque" and contained a "singular and mysterious interest" that was "well sustained throughout" (Irving to Poe, November 6, 1839). Poe took Irving's suggestions to create "William Wilson," a tale that incorporates elements of the Byronic hero[1] in the character of Wilson, but with the added influence of German Idealism.[2] Many critics such as Paul C. Jones, Leonard Engel, and Robert

Coskren have discussed aspects of Poe's use of German Idealism to craft the story. I build upon their arguments with a more specific focus on Poe's use of the doppelganger within the tradition of German Idealism, which functions as the tale's dominant motif. Poe's doppelganger differs from most depictions of the motif because Poe's doppelganger corrects the narrator's vices.

In the preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), Poe explains his frustrations of being accused by critics that his tales include too much "Germanism and gloom" (620). Poe responds that "Germanism is 'the vein' for the time being" and that tomorrow he could be "anything but German" (620). Furthermore, he states that "terror" is universal, not just German in nature, and can be found within the "soul" of all humans (620). Poe distanced himself from the influence of German literature between writing "William Wilson" and the publication of his stories in 1840, even though "allusions to German writers pervade[d]" his stories throughout his career (Isaak 217). During the 1830s and 1840s, many American writers became attracted to a "new kind of literature from Germany" that showed "man's involvement with the spiritual world" (Labriola 79). The Romantic movement, of which Poe was a part, was founded on the "spiritual and metaphysical tradition of German Idealism" (79). Poe represented the darker side of Romanticism and was inspired by the "*schwarze Romantik*," which investigated the belief that "the interaction between man and spirit revealed the dark and mysterious side of the individual" (79). Poe would explore this "mysterious side of the individual" in many of his works, including "William Wilson."

In *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (1996), Andrew J. Webber describes a series of premises to develop a working definition of the doppelganger in literature that informs the exploration of this motif in "William Wilson." The doppelganger is a "figure of visual compulsion" (3), often shown beholding the self as another, or alternatively, it is "beheld as an object by its other self" (3). Webber notes that the condition of "repetitive speech disorder" is prominent, as the doppelganger echoes, distorts, and parodies the "subjective faculty of free speech" (3). The doppelganger is a "performer of identity" that typically represents the "performative character of the subject" (3); there is a power play between ego and alter ego (4). The interchange of power between the subject and the doppelganger is a common theme in stories concerning the doppelganger. The doppelganger can also operate as a "figure of displacement" in stories (4). This means that the doppelganger appears out of place in order to subvert the will of the subject. A final premise of the doppelganger is "return and repetition": the doppelganger typically returns to the host subject and replays previous appearances (4). The doppelganger is usually a product of a broken home, and Webber

notes that the home is the original site of the "*unheimlich*" or "uncanny" (5). Webber's discussion focuses less on the initial causes of the doppelganger, whereas other critics have provided more insight into the cause of the split. Webber's work helps to illuminate how Poe used the Germanic origins of the doppelganger to create a story that portrays the complex and often dark mental state of the narrator.

"William Wilson" is told from the perspective of the narrator, who is near death at an old age at the beginning of the tale. The narrator describes his descent to becoming the "outcast of all outcasts" because of his actions, which he subsequently recounts throughout the story (217). His childhood was marked by "evil propensities" that left his friends in "serious disquietude" (217). During school, his evil intentions began to be interrupted by a mysterious, identical stranger. The stranger follows Wilson to Oxford, and finally to Rome, disrupting the narrator's attempt to cheat at cards and his "Byronic" seduction of a wealthy wife.  The narrator begins the story by giving himself a pseudonym because he asserts, the "fair page" in front of him "need not be sullied with [his] real appellation" (216). As stated by Webber, the home is the first site of the "*unheimlich.*" The narrator describes himself as a "descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable" (217). The narrator became a tyrant at a young age, stating he was "self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices" and "prey to the most ungovernable passions" (217). His parents could do nothing as his "voice" became "household law" (217). Webber states that the doppelganger "represents dysfunction in the family romance of structured well-being" (5). The narrator only briefly describes his childhood, and what little information he provides suggests that his home was a place of the narrator's domination of his family, but his doppelganger does not appear until he leaves home for school. The narrator's description of his childhood shows that his issues arise from an "inherited" family condition (217). He describes this familial condition of having an "easily excitable temperament" and an excessive imagination (217). There is no mention of a possible doppelganger at his home because he is "master of [his] own actions" (217). By leaving the family home for school, the narrator loses total control of his place in the home. This loss of power puts the narrator in an unfamiliar state of mind, which allows for the doppelganger to make himself known to the narrator.

The doppelganger in "William Wilson," referred to as "Wilson" throughout this essay, appears for the first time during the narrator's "third lustrum" at school, which is roughly around the time he was fifteen years old (219). The grounds of the prison-like school are surrounded by a "solid brick wall" with a bed of mortar and glass on top (218). The gate of the school is "studded with iron bolts" and "surmounted with jagged

iron spikes" (218). The principal of the school, also the reverend of the church, has a "countenance so demurely benign," but is described as a tyrant who has a "sour visage" who administers the "Draconian laws of the academy" like a prison warden (218). The structured setting of the school is incompatible with the narrator's childhood of supremacy. He must subordinate to a more powerful authority, which causes his coherent self to slowly break apart, leading him to escalating acts of debauchery to regain control.

The grounds of the school set it apart from ordinary schools. They are "irregular in form," and consist of many "capacious recesses" (219). The schoolhouse is described as a "palace of enchantment" by the narrator, but the dimensions are incredibly difficult to surmise (219). The narrator further describes the "windings" of the schoolhouse as "incomprehensible" (219). Each room has "three or four steps either in ascent or descent," and the lateral branches were "innumerable" and "inconceivable" (219). The narrator's inability to understand the "incomprehensible" schoolhouse reflects his inability to understand the workings of his own mind. Entering the prison-like school removes the sense of control from the narrator. No longer is he able to act out his "ungovernable passions" to control his fellow students or the principal of the school. In school, he experiences a loss of control that is concurrent with the appearance of Wilson, his doppelganger. Without the "implicit belief in [his] assertions," the narrator loses the ability to have total control (220). Lacking the "supreme and unqualified despotism" of control over Wilson, paired with the lack of control within the gates of the schoolhouse, leads to a splitting of the narrator into separate identities, which the narrator is powerless to stop.

The event that displaces the narrator's identity is the appearance of a particular student at the school who shares the same name and visage. At the beginning of the tale, the narrator calls himself "William Wilson," although he contends that it is not his real name. He asserts that he does not name himself because his "real appellation" would sully the page (216). The arrival of Wilson creates even more anger from the narrator because he is forced to hear his name spoken aloud and therefore it will be the "common property of the mob" (220). The narrator says his name is a common "every-day appellation" that he feels does not represent his "noble descent" (220). The appearance of Wilson creates a mixture of emotions in the narrator. He sees Wilson as his equal, which is unacceptable to him because the narrator has dominated his home throughout his childhood. The arrival of Wilson dislocates the narrator who, since an early age, has had no one to "refuse implicit belief in [his] assertions, and submissions to [his] will" (220). The narrator's arrival at Reverend Dr. Bransby's school causes a shift in the narrator's mental state. He is no longer the dominant force he was at home, but is now subject to

subordination by the school, which causes a crisis in self that allows the doppelganger, Wilson, to emerge. Bransby is a character of intrigue for the narrator, as the narrator is accustomed to dominating those in his household. The narrator views Dr. Bransby as a character of "spirit and perplexity" because he cannot understand how someone with a "countenance so demurely benign" can administer the "Draconian" laws of the school (218). The narrator cannot understand how a person can possess two different countenances because his own has been split into two.

A significant feature of the doppelganger in "William Wilson" is its use by Poe as a figure of displacement. The narrator's hatred of Wilson grows as Wilson puts himself in the way of the narrator. Wilson appears throughout the story to interfere with the narrator's plans in a positive way, which is one of the few examples in literature of a double that seeks to "annul the evil of the narrator" (Rosenfield 334). The doppelganger is usually depicted as an evil or darker version of the protagonist. The first displacement of the narrator takes place at the school. His inability to control Wilson leads him to resent Wilson's "arrogance" (223). At first, the narrator believes that his feelings towards Wilson could have been "easily ripened into friendship" (223). The hatred of Wilson grows to a point where the narrator decides to plot some "ill-natured pieces of practical wit at his expense" (224). The narrator enters Wilson's room, which is only lit by "bright rays" of the lamp, to see "the lineaments" of Wilson's face (224). He states that he "shook as with a fit of the ague" when he sees that the "lineaments" of Wilson's face are similar to his (224). The narrator questions whether or not what he saw was the "result of the habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation" (224). Unable to comprehend, or unwilling to understand, he and his doppelganger are one and the same, the narrator flees the school, never to return.

Subsequently, another displacement of the narrator happens years later when the narrator is a student at Eton. The narrator's "habits of vice" grow beyond anything at the schoolhouse (225). Since leaving Dr. Bransby's school a few months earlier, the narrator is now in a "vortex of thoughtless folly" (225). His time at Eton is spent drinking wine and engaging in other "dangerous seductions" (225). He spends nearly three years in "folly" at Eton, and his "habits of vice" have grown, just as his "bodily stature" (225). After a week of "soulless dissipation" the narrator decides to have a "secret carousal" in his chambers (225). Just as the narrator proposes a toast of "more than wonted profanity," he is interrupted by Wilson. Like his encounter with Wilson at Dr. Bransby's school, he meets Wilson in a room that "hung no lamp" and "no light at all was admitted" (225). Wilson only utters his name and causes the narrator to be "violently moved" by his action (226). The "whispered syllables" and "admonition" of Wilson shock the narrator, causing

a "thousand thronging memories of by-gone days" to shock his soul like a "galvanic battery" (226). As previously discussed, a feature of the doppelganger in German Idealism is that the doppelganger usually has some kind of "repetitive speech disorder" (Webber 3). Poe's narrator states that Wilson has a "weakness in the faucial or guttural organs," which causes Wilson only to speak "above a very low whisper" (222). Wilson's whisper shows the doppelganger's strength at the beginning of the story as he is slowly gaining power over the narrator's life. At the beginning of the story, Wilson speaks only the narrator's name. By the end of the story, Wilson's growing strength over the narrator allows him to speak in full to expose his cheating.

While the narrator is at Oxford a couple of years later, he realizes another displacement  when his "constitutional temperament broke forth with redoubled ardor" (226). At Oxford, a young, rich nobleman named Glendinning becomes the narrator's target. Glendinning is described by the narrator as having a "weak intellect" that "marked him as a fitting subject for [his] skill" (227). The narrator connives in a game of écarté to cheat Glendinning out of his riches by hiding "several little packages" in his sleeve (228). The narrator states that he "effected [Glendinning's] total ruin" during the card game and left him an "object for the pity of all" (228). Suddenly, every candle in the room is "extinguished, as if by magic," and a figure appears that is the same height and is wearing a similar cloak. The figure, in a "never-to-be-forgotten whisper," tells Glendinning that he is "uniformed of the true character of the person who has won…a large sum of money" (228). The figure, obviously Wilson, immediately leaves after exposing the narrator, but leaves an "exceedingly luxurious cloak of rare furs," which is the same cloak the narrator brought with him (229). As the narrator's actions grow baser, his doppelganger's actions against him grow by directly intervening in his schemes. The interventions come at moments when the narrator is on the brink of carrying out his evil deeds. These actions by Wilson show that he is a corrective force against the debased narrator.

Ultimately, the narrator flees Oxford to evade Wilson, but he is unable to escape. Wilson finds the narrator in Paris, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, and Moscow. By the time the narrator arrives in Rome, he has given himself up "entirely to wine," but resolute no longer to be "enslaved" by Wilson (230). Italy is a typical location for the doppelganger to displace a character in German literature, and Poe stays true to German literature by ending the story in Rome (Webber 6). The narrator is pursuing the "beautiful wife of the aged and doting Di Broglio" (230-231). Traditionally, the Byronic hero is extremely passionate and will try to accomplish their goals even if they are ignoble. Wilson appears to interrupt the narrator's pursuit. The appearance of Wilson during carnival in Rome is also a tradition in German doppelganger literature. The carnival allows for

the "suspension of social conventions" that can lead to the narrator's displacement by Wilson (Webber 4). The narrator becomes "frantic with every species of wild excitement" and plunges his sword with "brute ferocity" into Wilson. A mirror appears where "none had been perceptible before" and the narrator sees himself dabbled in blood (231). The narrator finally accepts that Wilson and he are the same. Wilson tells the narrator that "thou hast murdered thyself" (232). Wilson's last words ominously bring back the narrator's words from the beginning when he explains that his "virtue dropped bodily as a mantle" due to an unmentioned event (217). The killing of Wilson leads the narrator to "years of unspeakable misery" (217).

At the end of the tale, the reader is left to question whether or not the doppelganger was a physical person or a figure of the narrator's imagination. At the beginning of the story the narrator, who is near death, questions if he has "not indeed been living in a dream" or a "victim to the horror and mystery of the wildest of all sublunary visions" (217). He states that advice from Wilson was "not openly given," but only "hinted or insinuated" (223). The last visitation of Wilson, while the narrator is swindling the rich Glendinning of his money by cheating at cards, is the closest we get to understanding Wilson's actual existence. When Wilson "enters" the room, the candles all go out, and Wilson tips off the men that the narrator has something hidden in his sleeve. Wilson leaves the room, and the light returns. The narrator states that Wilson was cloaked when he entered the room, and that the narrator was the only other person cloaked. After Wilson leaves the room, the narrator is presented with a cloak that was "its exact counterpart in every, in even the minutest possible particular" (229). The narrator suggests that Wilson's presence is only felt in the room, and that no one could see Wilson. The evidence in the story suggests that the doppelganger is a product of the narrator's imagination, spurred on by leaving the home in which he had dominated. In Patrick Quinn's study of "William Wilson," he states that the double is "a mental projection and only that" (qtd. in Jones 239). The narrator cannot be relied upon throughout the story because he is unreliable from the beginning when he will not "sully" the page with his real name. He speaks of Wilson's superiority over him, but states that it is only acknowledged by "no one but myself" (221). He also states that none of his schoolfellows mentioned his similarity to Wilson, which one would assume would be the talk of the school. The initial appearance of Wilson at the school seems to be a result of the narrator's loss of power at the new school, where he could not bend the students to his will, which leads to the creation of Wilson, whom the narrator could dominate, and in turn, be dominated by.

Many of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous works explore the darkness and duality of the human psyche. Poe was able to take a brief sketch by Washington Irving and

enlarge it to encapsulate the inner struggle of a man who has become split into two opposing entities, which leads him to become the "outcast of all outcasts" by killing his doppelganger, who represents his good conscience. Webber's work on the doppelganger provides a way to explore Poe's adaptation of the doppelganger from the German Idealism tradition. Focusing on the act of displacement by the doppelganger in the story shows how Poe uses the doppelganger motif as a conscience to the narrator. Poe's "William Wilson" anticipates the rise of psychoanalysis and the inner self of man by depicting a character amid a psychological split, and it continues to provide psychoanalytic critics a rich text to be analyzed in multiple ways through multiple critical lenses. Poe reverses the doppelganger in this tale by making him a positive voice of virtue rather than a negative voice of temptation, but darkness prevails.

Notes

1. The Byronic hero is named after the poet Lord Byron. The Byronic hero is marked by arrogance, cynicism, and self-centeredness. The hero typically wears dark clothing and has dark hair. The hero possesses characteristics that are negative but can act in a heroic way. For further study, see Peter Thorslev's *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962).

2. German Idealism is a philosophical movement that emerged from Germany in the late 18th century. It developed from the works of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Some of the main focuses of German Idealism are the intersection of self and knowledge, freedom and morality, law and state, and history and reason. For further study, see *German Idealism: An Anthology and Guide* (2006), edited by Brian O'Connor and Georg Mohr.

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