ANALYSIS

"William Wilson" (1840)

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

The opening quotation points to the subject of the story--*conscience*. The narrator withholds his true name, making "William Wilson" a mask or persona. In the end, his double is wearing a literal mask. Wilson laments his fate as an outcast and confesses to "unpardonable crime." Then he begs to be pardoned, shifting responsibility: "I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control." He wants to be seen as a victim, like many criminals. However, he has a conscience. That is his main problem in life, as it may have been Poe's--the conflict between Romantic or criminal will and conscience. The existence of a conscience implies that he has free will and responsibility, as does the moralistic tone of the story, especially in the conclusion. Belief in a conscience differentiates Poe from Postmodernists. The reality of conscience invalidates Wilson/Poe's egocentricity and he destroys himself.

The story is an allegory of signs: The narrator's double, or Doppelganger, personifies his conscience in conflict with his *will*, as emphasized by the name *Wil*-liam *Wil*-son. The syllables have additional connotations: Will-*I*-am (ego) acquires a conscience like an outgrowth of his conditioning in school--Wil-*son* (conscience is "the son of man" or Christ within). Those who doubt that Poe meant this much by syllables should consider the name Arthur Gordon Pym as the protagonist of his spiritual autobiography. The word *will* is a motif in "William Wilson": "I grew self-willed"; "I was left to the guidance of my own will"; he refused "submission to my will"; "his frequent officious interference with my will"; "his varied interference with my will"; my "bitterly reluctant submission to his arbitrary will."

It is important to notice that Wilson acquires his conscience in school. Poe apparently believes that conscience is not innate and bestowed by God as Christians believed, but learned, conditioned into a person in childhood by society. At the same time, however, he acknowledges the possibility that conscience may be inborn, in which case the Christians might be right after all: "I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago--some point of the past even infinitely remote." On his deathbed, after calling out the name Reynolds for hours as if in horror at the prospect of falling through the white light into a hole and oblivion, according to the attending physician at the end Poe said, *"Lord help my poor soul!"*

The ingenuity in the tale consists of detailing the relationship and the conflict between *will* and *conscience*. The two Wilsons have the same name, same birth date and same height. They enter the same school the same day, an academy much like the one Poe attended in England, where he endured the rigors of social conditioning. "To the moralist it will not be necessary to say, in addition, that Wilson and myself were the most inseparable of companions"; and "I perceived that we were even singularly alike in general contour of person and outline of feature." Had they been brothers "we must have been twins." His singular whisper "grew the very echo of my own," but he has a "most unwelcome affectionateness of manner." They are so close they are suspected of homosexuality--a topic absolutely taboo at the time: "I was galled, too, by the rumor touching a relationship, which had grown current in the upper forms."

Yet his conscience is a "stranger." Nearly all the characters in Poe are strangers to each other. Wilson wants his conscience to conform to his will--to "perfect an imitation of myself." Instead, he is frustrated by the other Wilson's "intolerable spirit of contradiction." They quarrel, though conscience never raises his voice "above a whisper." The narrator begins to fear his conscience because he recognizes "proof of his true superiority": "His moral sense, at least, if not his general talents and worldly wisdom, was far keener than my own; and...I might, to-day, have been a better and thus a happier man, had I less frequently rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then but too cordially hated and too bitterly despised."

Wilson dwells in a "wilderness of sensation," is "addicted to the wildest caprices" and represents the Wilderness out of place and evil when unrestrained in the City. In the end he sees his conscience unmasked, as both literally and figuratively mirroring himself. By killing another person literally, he destroys his conscience, the best in himself--his humanity. There being no Garden in Poe, conscience is identified with the City, where he is killed--in Rome the "eternal city," though he dreamily acknowledges the possibility that conscience has a divine origin in the Sky. Once he indulges his will to the extent of destroying his conscience, Wilson is "dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope!"

As it becomes increasingly obvious that the double represents conscience, he is reduced to a sign and his behavior becomes ever more improbable, an example of Poe's inability to write an allegory of symbols that is also consistently plausible at the literal level, like the realistic allegories of Hawthorne and Melville. The dreamlike state of Poe's narrators subsumes implausibility into subjectivity and Expressionism.

Six years after "William Wilson" (1840) Poe again dramatized the futility of trying to escape conscience in "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), in which Montresor walls up Fortunato, but cannot forget what he did even after half a century and feels so guilty he has to confess, apparently to a priest.

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