

Text, Reader, and the Fusion of the “I” In Edgar Allan Poe’s “Alone”

Shajwan Nariman Fatah

Language Center, Charmo Center for Research, Training, and Consultancy
Charmo University, 46023 Chamchamal/ Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region-Iraq
Email: shajwan.nariman@charmouniversity.org

Ala Beshank Ahmed

Department of English Language, College of Education and Languages,
Lebanese French University, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Email : ala.beshank@lfu.edu.krd

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 20/4/2023

Accepted: 25/6/2023

Published: Winter2023

Keywords: *Edgar Allan Poe, alone, Poulet, Barthes, Derrida, text.*

Doi:

10.25212/lfu.qzj.8.5.55

ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe’s “Alone” (1875), has been read biographically; various critics have analyzed this poem as a reference to the poet’s psychological issues related to his childhood – his troubled relations with his parents. However, this study aims to put such readings aside, instead, it attempts to have a close analysis and exclude the external agents. Through the semiotic approach, we unravel the words and explore the other side of significations, then relate the interpretation to literary theories. In the discussion, the analysis shows the integration of the text with the reader through the narrative “I,” the phenomenological theory of reading (Georges Poulet,) and then connect the findings to the works of major theorists of post-structuralism: Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe’s “Alone” was published posthumously by E. L. Didier in Scribner's Monthly in September 1875. The poem was revealed and released twenty-six years after Poe’s death (Cauthen, 1950, p. 284). Readers relate this verse to Poe’s personal conflicts. For instance, Martins (2010) states that “Alone” is a reflection of Poe’s early stages of his childhood to adolescence; Poe’s isolation during the early years of his childhood, he couldn’t see his mother for some reasons which affected him

psychologically. She claims that infant Poe must have been acutely aware of the loss of his father and the fading of his mother (p. 137).

Martins applies a psychoanalytical approach to investigate Poe's verse – she states that these expressions in the first lines, "from childhood's hour.... I loved alone" show a sense of loneliness. Moreover, the later lines of the verse indicate the concept of an "identity crisis".

Similar to Martins, Cauthen (1950) sheds light on the biography of the poet and he states that critics have agreed that Poe composed this verse during his youth: "the tone of the poem is certainly not that of the mature poet, but it contains many resemblances to his early works" (p. 289). However, in this paper, the researchers argue the readers' fascination with the poet's biography and the connections they have made between the images in the poem and Poe's life. It is essential to state that the authorship of this verse is not certain – Cauthen asserts:

Although the poem is purported to be in Poe's handwriting, Didier admitted that he added a title and a date to the manuscript. The title has been retained by Poe's editors, but the date has been a suspect. Although Didier had implied to Ingram that the dating of the poem 'Baltimore, March 17, 1829' was in Poe's hand, actually it was his own handwriting (1950, p. 286).

From this perspective, editors have added several modifications to the text. Obviously, there is no reference to Poe's diaries. For this reason, the voice in the verse is the only focal point of the analysis, which this study aims to investigate, and also, explore the shift of the identity between the text and the reader.

2. Reading the text

The title – "Alone" – was attached to the verse posthumously. Grammatically, the term "alone" is merely an adjective that signifies the meaning of singularity or being by oneself. Plainly, the semantic function of this word suggests a modification in the text. To put it differently, the title leads the audience to deeper layers of signification through reading the poem. Multiple meanings are suggested: the speaker might be alone, there is a lonely character, there is isolation, or the reader is alone while the verse is read. Strikingly, this title in this context shows the difference and the structure of language and how each sign in the language has transformed throughout history.

The twenty-two lines verse are recounted by the anonymous narrative voice “I,” which many critics have read as a representation of the poet. Nevertheless, in this study, the researchers change the direction of these thoughts through the interpretation of the unknown speaker – as one goes through the thread of the analysis, it appears that the pronoun “I” shifts back and forth between the text and the reader:

From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—

In the opening line of the verse, the term “hour” introduces readers to the very beginning of existence. To put it another way, the moment of birth. Since “hour” indicates a particular duration of time, it reverses the previous reading of Poe’s boyhood diaries. That is to say, this period from a literal level appears to show the sense of childhood, however, metaphorically, childhood also indicates purity, immaturity, or the launch of experiences. Thus, it could be a symbol for the very beginning of reading a text. Gradually, the verse grabs the reader’s eyes to further steps with the expressions: “I have not been/ as others were,” which refer to the distinction and differences. This phenomenon has been studied by the theorists of post-structuralism. In other words, differentiation, a Derridean concept, is a play on the words "difference" and "deferment," and it refers to the property of language by which meaning is generated because a word differs from other words in a signifying system, while at the same time, meaning is inevitably and infinitely deferred or postponed, is constantly under erasure, and can only be glimpsed through "aporias" or deadlocks in understanding.

Each time, through a deconstructive reading, differences compromise a text's cohesion and unity. As a result, meaning is scattered throughout the text and is only discernible in remnants, in the never-ending web of connotation. One signifier leads to a signified, which in turn becomes a signifier for another signified, and so forth in the free play of meanings (Mambrol, 2016). In other words, the difference here

suggests the way readers understand the language and the various meanings it proposes. Plainly, the speaker's expressions show a sense of difference not only in terms of identity but actually in the play of language from both inside and on the outside – to what extent the eye that reads the words in terms of pronunciation could be the “I” that reveals the hidden significations in the text. Later, the narration shifts to the reader through the terms, “I have not seen/ as others saw”. This depicts the moments of reading and the fusion of the reader's horizon as the pronoun “I” plays back and forth between the words and the lector – this is what Georges Poulet explains in his *Phenomenology of Reading*, he states that as we open the book and read the text subconsciously, we are integrated with the “I” and no longer it is obvious who's the voice is – we as readers are the subject that is spelled out. Remarkably, Poulet compares a book to other objects in terms of the essence and their relation to our desire; he demonstrates the idea through the examples of vase and statute – as these objects seize our gaze, we realize that their external side is merely their value (pp. 54- 55).

Different from these, every time we see a book, we look at it, and it calls us to open it; the moment we open it – subconsciously – we explore the language (Poulet, 1969, pp. 53-56). This seems to be the main issue in this verse; the invisible relation between the text and not only the eyes but also, the thought of the reader. Besides that, the term “see,” literally means to look at something, yet, in this context, it suggests the concept of understanding. In other words, the text is interpreted in various ways by diverse readers. Once more, the recount shifts back to the text which couldn't bring its “passion from a “common source”, the term “passion” implies the relationship between the text, author, and reader. This seems to be a complicated bond in which readers play the authority in creating the meanings and the concepts underneath the terms. This evokes Poulet's fusion of the “I” which constantly plays within the identity of the lector and the character in the poem. It is essential to refer to well-known work by the modern philosopher and thinker, Roland Barthes's *The Death of Author*, in which he illustrates the idea behind the disappearance of authors. He also states that the voice in a text destroys all the origins (Barthes, 1977, p. 142). We no longer know who is the pronoun “I” – in simple terms, is it Poe himself? The text? Or it is the reader – us – as we read the verse. This origin is shown through the signifiers: “common

source” which is also related to the “childhood hour”. The narrative voice continues with deeper layers of meaning that are unraveled throughout the poem:

From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—

These terms depict the moment in which the text was created by its author and has lost its aura, and its origin is given to the reader to be engaged and integrated with every hidden sign and symbol of the verse. Similarly, the term “sorrow,” could not be brought from the “same source,” plainly, the meaning of the text is constantly moving and there is no “passion or sorrow,” but a bunch of signifiers that have been played by the author and re-arranged by the reader differently. Critics have read this expression biographically and related it to those moments in which Poe was in mental pain and deep sorrow: “I could not awaken/ my heart to joy at the same tone” (Brooks, 2017). However, on a metaphorical level, these terms take the reader to deeper layers of signification; the “heart” typically representing a tangible and crimson entity, is not merely a representation of the anatomical organ itself, but rather the physiological entity accountable for circulation, housing emotions, intensity, and fondness. Serving as the vital source of life, paradoxically, a solitary heart seemingly suggests its disconnection from the physical form it belongs to, potentially lacking the capacity for circulation or rhythmic pulsation (Pillai, 1997, p. 838). From this perspective, the “heart” proposes various interpretations that it no longer seems to be a living organ; in this context, it appears to be read as the essence of the text – the meanings – that has changed over history. Put it differently, the heart of the poem is the value that changes over time. Furthermore, the word “tone” suggests the meaning of “sound” or the voice in the text that has lost every origin – a common source or common spring – which is rooted in Barthes’s *The Death of Author*. The speaker continues:

And all I lov’d—I lov’d alone—
Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn

From ev'ry depth of good and ill

The expressions: “and all I loved – I loved alone,” indicate the confusion in the meaning for which the function of “alone” in this context seems to be a noun or merely an adjective. First, the past verb “loved” signifies the sense of desire and appreciation which once again is related to the relation between the text and the audience. The latter, “alone” – is derived from “(all) and (one) a person who is alone is all-in-one; there's no one else around”. Therefore, the recognition of a text by the reader in the moment of reading it and creating the meaning suggests a sense of individualism. In addition, the word “heart,” is connected to both “passion and sorrow”. The reader’s fondness for the text shifts throughout history.

The narrative voice continues, “then – in my childhood – in the dawn/ of a most stormy life – was drawn”. Plainly, the text depicts the illusions that are created by conventions of “stormy life,” which has constructed the sense of “drawn” – the meanings of the language. Put in another way, this pain begins as the lector struggles with the fusion between the meanings of the text and the imposed ideologies as he/she reads the verse and forgets who is the “I” – and therefore questions the identity from the beginning of the “dawn”. Metaphorically, this implies the beginning of existence rather than the early part of the day. This is also connected to Poulet’s theory; as a lector is intertwined with the text; the cultural, national, and historical ideologies are constructed through the significations of the language and the synthesis of the “I”.

The mystery which binds me still—
From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that 'round me roll'd

The speaker appears to be entangled with “mystery” from “depth of good and ill,” in other words, the language itself has been constructed with multiple meanings through history and there is no point in answering the riddle of its essence. Language is a system that is created through various meanings – sign and symbols. Thus, the



lector is lost between the conscious and the unconscious – between reality and the, manufactured consent. The term “fountain” suggests the same signification of the “common source” that indicates the meaning of “origin”. This mystery seems to travel through the ups and downs – “red cliffs” of the “mountain”. From a literal level, these ekphrastic expressions depict a landscape, however, in this context, they propose different connotations; they may depict the external view of a book that Poulet describes, which eventually takes the reader to the mystery within it. The narrative continues:

In its autumn tint of gold—
From the lightning in the sky
As it pass'd me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—

The yellow color of the autumn has unraveled the text through its “gold” colors, these elicitation evoke the meaning of transformation from the moment of existence – fountain – that is connected to both common source and spring. Strikingly, the “sun” here does not denote a literal meaning, but actually, it connotes the meaning of life which is also related to the “common source” – the moment in which we are re-born and the experience is created – as we read the verse we are born with the mysterious “I”. This highlights Derrida’s theory on the metaphorical levels; in terms of poststructuralism reading, as it in general, advocates a critical analysis of language, power, and social institutions, elevating the complex and contingent nature of meaning, identity, and knowledge, shows the concept of “difference”. It encourages a self-aware and reflective approach to analyze and questioning dominant discourses while acknowledging the plurality of interpretations and the fluidity of human experiences.

To illustrate these lines, as the reader moves towards the end of the verse which is viewed as the “autumn,” the meanings are unraveled. The “gold” color is a metaphor for both the sun and the fall season which means from the moment of existence till the moment of death. The significations are shifted and transformed as the reader implies all the ideologies in the text. This line is a metaphor for reading the verse from

the beginning to its conclusion. The terms “from the lightning in the sky” appear to signify the image of the sun. However, they portray the image of the moment of opening a book that is connected to rebirth. The terms “as it passed me flying by/ from the thunder, and the storm” indicate the voice in the text that brings the illusion – storm – to its origin.

And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view—

Finally, the text reveals “the cloud that took the form”. This ekphrastic expression signifies the image of ideas that have constructed the concepts. The term “heaven,” is related to the “sky,” which its color is “blue” and it is full of demons in the view of the text. Obviously, the reader’s illusion is viewed as a “demon”. This is illustrated through the very abstract concepts and ideologies that readers impose on the verse. This integration provides complicated issues as the lector is born through reading the poem. In the same way, the meanings of the text have been modified, as more signs are added. Eventually, the language is no longer pure and does not possess its value as it is used and interpreted by various readers. To sum up, the process of engaging with the text leads the reader to undergo a transformative experience where they adopt fresh ideologies and establish a new sense of identity. Poulet elucidates this phenomenon by illustrating how the construction and deconstruction of the self, as explored in Barth's concept of the "The Death of the Author," facilitates a profound understanding of the text. Consequently, the act of reading becomes synonymous with comprehending the text and imbuing it with a rich tapestry of meaning, akin to the transition from the vibrant hues of autumn to the tranquil shades of blue, culminating in the poem's ultimate conclusion

3. Conclusion

The literary work “Alone” by Edgar Allan Poe is interpreted as a reflective account resembling a personal diary from Poe's childhood, portraying his internal struggles and tumultuous familial interactions. However, theoretically and through close reading, a philosophical aspect of the text is explored by connecting the analysis to

the theories of several thinkers such as Derrida, Barthes, and Poulet. Eventually, the language appears to depict the bridge between the text and the reader through the narrative voice “I”. The evocations in the verse show the process of reading and the fusion of the unknown speaker that shifts back and forth between the lector and the verse. Eventually, this creates an identity for the reader and extracts the script from its aura.

References:

- Alone. (n.d.). Retrieved from Poetry Foundation:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46477/alone-56d2265f2667d>
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barzun, J., Cestre, C., & Mabbott, T. O. (2023, April 6). *Edgar Allan Poe*. Retrieved from Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edgar-Allan-Poe>
- Brooks, R. (2017, May 27). Alone by Edgar Allan Poe. Retrieved from Poem Analysis: <https://poemanalysis.com/edgar-allan-poe/alone/>
- Cauthen, I. B. (1950). Poe’s Alone: [Its Background, Source, and Manuscript]. *Studies in Bibliography*, 284–291.
- Cohen, A. (2018, August 6). Unraveling the Mysteries behind Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer”. Retrieved from Artsy.net: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-unraveling-mysteries-caspar-david-friedrichs-wanderer>
- Mambrol, N. (2016, March 22). Derrida’s Concept of Difference. Retrieved from Literary Theory and Criticism: <https://literariness.org/2016/03/22/derridas-concept-of-difference/>
- Martins, C. B. (2010). Shared Identity Constructs and the Cognitive Triad Represented in Poe’s “Alone.”. *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 131-141.
- Pillai, J. (1997). Death and Its Moments: The End of the Reader in History. *MLN*, 836- 875.
- Poulet, G. (1969). Phenomenology of Reading. *New Literary History*, 1, 53-68. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468372>

دهق، خوینەر و تیکه لَبوونی "من" له هۆنراوهی "ته نیا" ی ئیدگار ئالان پۆ

پوخته:

هۆنراوهی "ته نیا" ی ئیدگار ئالان پۆ به شیوهیهکی ژياننامهیی خویندراوه تهوه؛ هه ندیک له په خه گران ئەم دهقه یان شیکردۆته وه وهک ئاماژه یهک پۆ کیشه دهروونییه کانی پۆی په یوه ست به منداییه وه. ئەمه ش به و مانایه یه که په یوه ندییه کانی له گه ل دایک و باوکی کیشه ی هه یه. له گه ل ئەوه شدا، له م توێژینه وه یه دا، ئیمه هه ول دده یین ئەم جوړه خویندنه وه انه به جیهیلین، له جیاتی ئەوه، هه ول دده یین شیکردنه وه یه کی نزیکمان هه بیّت و بریکاره دهره کییه کان به دوور بگرین. له ریگه ی خویندنه وه ی سیمیۆتیکه وه، ئیمه وشه کان ئاشکرا ده که یین و لایه کی دیکه ی ئاماژه کان دده و ژینه وه، پاشان شیکردنه وه که به تیۆرییه ئەده بییه کانه وه په یوه ست ده که یین. له گه توگو گو که دا، ئیمه یه که خستنی دهق و خوینەر له ریگه ی گێرپانه وه ی "من" وه نیشان دده یین، بیردۆزی دیارده ناسی خویندنه وه (جوړج پۆلیت) و دواتر چه مکه کان به کاره کانی بیردۆزه سه ره کییه کانی پاش پیکهاته خوازییه وه په یوه ست ده که یین: جاک دیریدا و پۆلاند بارس.

النص والقارئ واندماج "ضمير المتكلم" ل إدغار آلان بو

المخلص:

تمت قراءة الشعر "وحده" ل إدغار آلان بو سيرة ذاتية؛ قام العديد من النقاد بتحليل هذا النص كمرجع لقضايا بو النفسية المتعلقة بطفولته. أي علاقاته المضطربة مع والديه. ومع ذلك، في هذه الورقة، نحاول وضع مثل هذه القراءات جانباً، بدلاً من ذلك، نحاول إجراء تحليل دقيق واستبعاد العوامل الخارجية. من خلال القراءة السيميائية، نكشف الكلمات ونستكشف الجانب الآخر من الدلالات، ثم نربط التحليل بالنظريات الأدبية. في المناقشة، نعرض تكامل النص والقارئ من خلال السرد "I"، "النظرية الظاهرية للقراءة (جورج بولت)" ثم ربط المفاهيم بأعمال المنظرين الرئيسيين لما بعد البنيوية: جاك دريدا ورولان بارتس.