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09/13/2020

ENGL111H

Textual Analysis

“The Angel of the Odd” and the Unreliable Narrator’s Night of Misadventures?

Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Angel of the Odd” is a story of a man who believes odd occurrences can be explained away. After having a meal, the narrator reads the paper and comes across a “contemptible falsehood” (Poe 24) about a man who died from playing Puff the Dart. Out of the blue, the narrator hears a strange voice and sees an odd creature. As the narrator and The Angel speak, the narrator gets extremely drunk and the misadventures begin. Because the mantel clock stops working, the narrator oversleeps, misses an insurance appointment, his house burns down, breaks an arm, decides to take a wife, exposes “alien hair” (Poe 28), gets something in an eye, misses meeting another woman, attempts suicide, has clothes stolen by a crow, and finally finds himself dangling from a hot air balloon driven by the Angel. When the narrator finally accepts odd things happen without rational explanation, he wakes up in his living room amongst a slew of broken liquor bottles and “an empty jug of the Schiedam Kirschenwässer” (Poe 30). Poe’s humorous short story “The Angel of the Odd” serves as a moral lesson about the dangers of alcoholism which Poe conveys through purpose, audience, tone, and humor style.

The short story’s primary purpose cautions readers about the dangers of alcoholism. During the late nineteenth century, drug and alcohol use was rampant. Drug abusers were viewed as deviants. At the same time, the pre-cursor to Prohibition was forming – the temperance movement. The temperance movement attempted to stop alcohol consumption (“Temperance Movement”). General knowledge contends Poe was a raging alcoholic, but Poe most likely suffered from dipsomania (Robertson 4). “Dipsomania is a type of alcoholism which is characterized by periodic bouts of uncontrollable craving for alcohol” (Novak). This is supported by the narrator’s constant heavy drinking. For example, the narrator finishes off “some miscellaneous bottles of wine, spirit, and liqueur,” the Angel taps the narrator “on the forehead with the neck of one of the long bottles” and gives the narrator “two or three hard, consecutive raps upon the forehead as before” (Poe 25-26). Collectively, these examples show the Angel enabling the narrator’s alcoholism which results in odd misadventures. It is this overindulgence in alcohol that is the root cause of the narrator’s problems. Because “The Angel of the Odd” is a moral lesson, Poe has a specific audience in mind.

Poe is secretly writing to alcoholics. Poe has sprinkled thinly veiled references throughout the short story which should resonate with most alcoholics. When the narrator first hears the Angel, it is a “rumbling in my ears” (Poe 25). Most alcoholics describe having a voice inside their head telling them what to do, what to say, how to act, and who they inevitably end up having conversations with. Just as the narrator suggests, the Angel is nothing more than a figment of his imagination. the Angel’s speech pattern is meant to elicit laughs, but is an exaggerated German accent mean to sound absurd. For example, when the narrator says he thought Angels had wings, the Angel responds with “Te wing!…vat I pe do mitt e wing? Mein Gott! Do you take me for a shicken?” (Poe 26). This exaggerated language found throughout Poe’s story is a great comic device but if looked at from a sober person’s perspective, these conversations such as, “Will you pe take de odder pottle, or ‘ave you pe got zober yet, and come to your zenzes?” and “Put your right hand into your left preeches pocket, ten, in token ov your vull zubmizzion” (Poe 29), Poe uses these language choices to show how alcoholism turns a person’s thoughts and words into absurdist nonsense only they will ever understand. Not only is Poe an expert in using language to convey an alcoholic’s drunk ramblings, Poe makes unique tonal choices which further strengthen the short story’s moral lesson.

“The Angel of the Odd” has a tone of anger mixed with humor which ultimately ends in acceptance of the Odd. Poe writes, “Upon seeing this, I fell into a great rage without exactly knowing why” (Poe 24). This line is important because readers must question why Poe introduced the narrator’s anger so early. Poe uses this to alert the reader the narrator’s quickness to anger. Reading further on, readers find this line, “You are a drunken vagabond…and I shall …order my footman to kick you into the street” (Poe 25). This line reinforces Poe’s purpose alcoholism is dangerous because many alcoholics are prone to anger. Finally, this line, “this language was rather more than I could bear…I seized a salt-celler…and hurled it” (Poe 26) signals the narrator’s depth of anger. Because the Angel has entered the narrator’s house unexpectedly, this anger is expected. If the narrator is to be believed, the Angel is nothing more than an anthropomorphic collection of bottles which could easily be picked up and removed making the narrator’s anger out of place. As the they continue talking, Poe introduces the Angel’s exaggerated German accent. While lines such as, “mein Gott, te man is eder ferry dronk or ferry zorry”, “You pelief, ten, in te possibility of te odd?”, and “you mus pe so dronk as de pig den for not zee me” (Poe 25-29) bring humor to the story, this exaggerated speech forces readers to read these lines out loud so they can hear the Angel’s absurdity. Considering the Angel’s absurdist speech, Poe’s excellent use of tone, and the narrator’s odd misadventures, a different humor style emerges.

Poe uses Buster Keaton style comedy to convey humor. Buster Keaton was an incredible comedy actor who specialized in physical comedy. His silent films often found him in odd situations made to make audiences laugh (Services 2 – The Damfinos). When the Angel disappears, the story takes a wild turn. The narrator misses his insurance renewal appointment, his house burns down, breaks his arm, does not marry, loses another romance, tries to kill himself, a crow steals his clothes, and finds himself swinging from a hot air balloon. Even though it takes 50 years for moving pictures to start, these odd misadventures read as a comedy script. Using physical comedy, Poe paints mental pictures for readers to see. Using the Angel’s absurdist speech patterns and the narrator’s misadventures, Poe’s created a script Buster Keaton could perform. As the narrator hangs from a balloon, he looks up and sees the pilot – the Angel. After asking for help, the Angel gives it on one condition. The narrator must “pelief, ten, in te possibility of te odd?” (Poe 29) and must believe oddities happen with no rational explanation. It is only then the narrator is released from his odd misadventures. He finds himself back in his house with “an empty jug of the Schiedam Kirschenwässer” (Poe 30). Because the narrator is unreliable, “The Angel of the Odd” forces readers to question if the Angel really exists. Perhaps everything the narrator experienced was all in his head or the narrator is simply a hallucinating drunk. By the end of the short story, Poe forces readers to draw their own conclusions.

Superficially, “The Angel of the Odd” is a funny but truly unbelievable story. As readers peel back its layers, Poe’s story serves as a moral lesson about the dangers of alcoholism. Through the Angel’s speech and the narrator’s anger, the use of humor and tone reinforce the moral lesson. Poe is often mischaracterized as an alcoholic, but Poe had a misunderstood behavioral disorder called dipsomania (Robertson 4). Through Poe’s language use, tonal choices, and physical comedy descriptions, Poe conveys what living with dipsomania is like. Poe gives readers an insight into how this disorder greatly affects a person’s life – waking up in strange places, bizarre situations, and strange conversations – as odd misadventures. Through “The Angel of the Odd”, Poe offers reduced alcoholic consumption can lead to taking control over this disorder. Because dipsomania is a disorder and not deviant behavior as thought in the nineteenth century, self-control alone will not stop the cravings. A final wink to the Angel blames the narrator’s misadventures on an empty jug of Schiedam Krischenwässer. Maybe if Poe could stop after one drink, his misadventures might never have materialized. Or vood dey, mee deer dronk veedur?

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