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A Comparison of Themes

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**Introduction**

Literature evolved with the intellect of the human being. It played different roles in different eras. Generally, it is believed that literature either indirectly reflects the society or it attempts to set the morals for a society so the society would follow those morals and would reflect in a certain way. Furthermore, literature attempts to prophesize about how society would reflect in near or far future. American literature is considered one of the richest kinds of the literature of the world albeit it has a short history of a few centuries. Realism refers to the portrayal of the true picture of a society without modifying the facts or adding didacticism into it. 19th-century American literature, being influenced by French literature, is identical in being *realist* literature. The majority of writers chose to write on the actual issues in society. Realism has not a specified definition and it changes from region to region, but scholars have a consensus that realism in American literature dealt generally with the issues of the middle and poor class. Suspense in a piece of literature is used to keep the reader engaged and mystified about the development and conclusion of a story. An African American author Harriet Jacobs and a White American have written in different genera, but their works share a theme. *The Tell-Tale Heart* written by Edgar Ellen Poe and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl authored by Harriet Jacobs are full of suspense and both works deal with the idea of *Realism*. This essay discusses how both authors despite using different genera produced literature on the same theme. Likewise, the essay attempts to explore socio-economic and psychological issues faced by the poor and middle class of the 19th century.

**Body**

Edgar Ellen Poe and Harriet Jacobs are two prominent literati of the 19th century. They both penned their inner approach to society. Poe spent a miserable life due to ailing health; early death of his beloved wife Virginia, and financial setbacks that he had to bear because he solely depended on *writing* for all his needs. His misery and uneasiness are apparent in his works like *Black Cat* (August 1843) and *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) where he appears as a sick-minded cold-blooded killer. *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) is one of the masterpieces of Edgar Ellen Poe and typical of his nature. It is a fiction story that is written in a biographical tone. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is a non-fiction autobiography of Harriet Jacobs who started her life as a slave girl in the South and ended as a *free* American in the North. This book symbolizes the miserable life of hundreds of thousands of African American girls who were living as sub-humans in America during the 19th century.

Edgar Ellen Poe is rightfully considered the pioneer of thriller literature in America. His short stories haunt the reader and the reader does not give up on reading until the story ends, thanks to the profusion of suspense in his works. His short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* is an ideal example of suspense. Poe writes that he was alright and friendly to an old man living in his apartment. He does not know why he disliked only one eye of that old man and killed that man successfully for that one eye. He hides the corpse successfully but later reveals to the policemen the location of the corpse. Thus, he keeps his reader in deep confusion about what will follow. The author boosts the impulse of the reader by extraordinarily demonizing the old man’s eye. He says: “His eye was like the eye of a Vulture” (Allan, Edgar. P.p. 2). He does not even bother to introduce that old man, but he glamorizes the plan of his murder as he were going to assassinate a known state man. He states that he planned the murder for a week: "For seven nights I did this, seven long nights, every night at midnight" (Allan, Edgar. P.p 3). It appears to the reader that a different kind of murder or a miraculous escape will follow as Poe is speaking like a detective about the murder. Eventually, he kills him smoothly and the reader assumes that the denouement has been reached, but the entrance of the policemen increases the suspense again. He convinces them that nothing bad happened, but after they are satisfied, he reveals the place where the dead body of the old man is buried. The reader is stunned with this action of Poe.

Harriet has written quite a long autobiography using actual details with the only chance of the character names, but thanks to his technique of adding suspense to her work the reader does not lose interest. Furthermore, she uses *pathos* to appeal to keep her reader engaged. *Pathos* appeal is used to engage the audience by boosting their emotions. She wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) on the insistence of her fellow activists when she formally joined the famous *Abolitionist* movement against slavery in America. This book reveals her life journey from a slave to a free American. The selected chapters for this essay are *The Flight* and *Free at Last* which describe how she escaped her *master’s* work field and finally won freedom. She does not predict anything rather she uses shifts in dialect and her conjectural thoughts that make her reader doubtful whether she would be able to escape or not. For example, in *The Flight,* she reveals her intention about running off but apprehends that the consequences will be terrible for her family and herself if she cannot succeed. She writes: “..and if I failed, O what would become of my poor children? They would be made to suffer for my fault” (Jacobs, Harriet. P.p 146). The reader feels that she might compromise her peace for the sake of her children as she appears compassionate towards them, but she escapes the house of Dr. Flint: "I feared that the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart, but I could not go into the uncertain future without one last look" (Jacobs, Harriet. P.p148). Similarly, in the final chapter *Free at Last* she makes the reader skeptical about her fate when she introduces Daniel Dodge, son in law of Dr. Flint, who came to find her using his full potential. She does not feel satisfied with her future until Mrs. Bruce embraces her and says that she has paid for her, but not bought her. Mrs. Bruce says: "O Linda, I'm so glad it's all over! You wrote to me as if you thought you were going to be transferred from one owner to another. But I did not buy you for your services. I should have done just the same if you had been going to sail for California to-morrow" (Jacobs, Harriet. P.p 150). She uses pathos appeal throughout the text to keep her reader engaged and apprehensive about her future.

Edgar Ellen Poe is among the leading American writers who renounced *idealism* in their writing and portrayed society as they perceived it. Being a *realist* piece of literature *The Tell-Tale Heart (1843)* is identical in portraying confused nature of contemporary Americans. Realist literature refers to portraying society as it appears, especially the lives of common (poor and middle-class) citizens. Common citizens were facing challenging economic circumstances under a rigid *Capitalist* social structure after *Industrial Revolution* (Braxton, Joanne. N.p). It caused silence anxiety among the masses who were too busy with their business that they lost intimate feelings for their brethren and mates. Additionally, they were preached by the Church to have an ethical character. Religion was at one side and (Capitalist) society at the other. A state of confusion rather mental chaos was penetrating the psyche of common citizens that they did not know what to do and why. The protagonist of Poe’s story attempts to clarify that he is not mad, but ironically gives the evidence that shows him mentally sick: “I heard Sounds from heaven; and I heard sounds from hell” (Allan, Edgar.p.p 1). A normal person can never make such claims (Rajan, Gita. N.p). He kills a fragile old man with whom he has a good relationship, but he does not know even the reason for his action: "It is impossible to say how the idea first entered my head" (Allan, Edgar.1). A grown-up man appears insane if he talks in such away. He plans the murder of his home mate and kills him brutally for a petty reason: the old man's ugly eye. Nevertheless, the confusion does not stop here, his conscience stands tall after he successfully kills the man and conceals his dead-body. He feels the heartbeat of the old man: “Still his heart was beating; Louder, louder, louder!” (Allan, Edgar. 3). It shows that despite being a cold-blooded murder, the protagonist was still under the influence of religious or moral education that activates our conscience.

Harriet Jacobs also does not mind portraying the actual picture of her society. She is outspoken in telling the brutalities of the Whites against African Americans. She uses her character as a synecdoche to describe the sufferings of all Black slave girls. She reveals how her old master Dr. Flint attempted to have sex with her when she was a teen girl. It was a norm that the White landowners used to use their slave girls for sex as well. Dr. Flint is even supported by his son to persuade Linda (Jacobs) for this practice that she denies categorically and receives physical punishment. She explains how difficult it was for a Black girl to escape slavery in such a great country like America during the 19th century. The Whites had full authority and constitutional endorsement to punish their slaves as they liked. For instance, when Linda escaped Dr. Flint’s house, he announced: “If I find out that any of *my* niggers have had anything to do with this damned business, I’ll give ‘em five hundred lashes” (Jacobs, Harriet. 148)The life for negroes was so difficult that neither religion nor governing institutions were able to even condemn this inhumane practice until the Abolitionists rose for their rights and put an end to slavery in America. Nevertheless, Jacobs notes that the dark and painful memories of slavery would be inerasable from the scriptures of history: "The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion" (Jacobs, Harriet. P.p 302).

**Conclusion**

19th century American literature is full of suspense and the writers focused upon writing on *realism* ideals. For instance, they wrote about the actual issues of society and portrayed society as it was in that era. A fiction story *The Tell-Tale Heart (1843)* written by Edgar Ellen Poe and a non-fiction autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)* written by Harriet Jacobs share the theme of realism and they both are full of suspense that makes them typical 19th-century shreds of literature. Poe highlights the state of confusion among common American whereas Jacobs presents the hardships that African American slave girls faced before they won *Civil Rights* in America. Both the works are commendable shreds of 19th century American literature.

**Cited Works**

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