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THE THEME OF DEATH IN THE FICTION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE AND DAZAI

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Pula, 2024. godine.

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Potpis

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Introduction

Death is a complex theme in literature, explored by many authors throughout their works. Two famous authors, Edgar Allan Poe and Dazai Osamu¹, delve deeply into the meaning of death and use it as a central motif in their works, sometimes as a literal and sometimes as a metaphorical motif. Though they lived in very different time periods and cultures, the motif of death binds their works, as it is evident that they both had a fascination with death and mortality. Edgar Allan Poe is known for his dark and eerie tales, shrouded with the omnipresent feel of death, often with death being a central theme. Poe faced many tragedies throughout his life, mainly the grief following the loss of his parents and many women he loved. Some believe that his early introduction to death may have influenced his later writings, which often included young, beautiful, and dying women. These experiences influenced his writings, filling his works such as "The Raven," "The Black Cat," "The Mask of the Red Death," and others with themes of death, guilt, paranoia, and the supernatural.

Dazai Osamu, a prominent Japanese author, also grappled with the theme of death in his works. His most famous works *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun*, explored the effects of existential turmoil that often led to suicide, with some of his other works, like the collection of short stories *The Final Years* following the same pattern. Like Poe, Dazai struggled with alcohol his whole life, often leading him to make wrong decisions in life which would only result in his further downfall. Dazai's characters, most famously Ōba Yōzō from *No Longer Human* and *Flowers of Buffoonery*, reflected Dazai's real-life struggles with alcohol, drugs, and frequent attempts at suicide. Through the character of Ōba Yōzō, using his signature *I-novel* style of writing, Dazai introduced readers to his life of alienation, depression, and filled with suicide attempts seen as a means of escape.

This thesis will compare how each of the two authors saw and portrayed death as a prevalent motif in some of their works, examining how their personal experiences may have influenced their way of writing. Deeper analysis of common themes connected to death in relevant works will give us an insight into the effects death had on the authors

¹ Japanese: 太宰 治.

and their characters, and also the similarities and differences in their works that deal with death.

1. Dazai Osamu

1.1. Biography

Man under the famous pseudonym Dazai Osamu was born as Tsushima Shūji², on the 19th of June 1909, in Kanagi, a small town in the Aomori prefecture. He finished almost all of his education in the Aomori prefecture, with his later education at the Tokyo Imperial University being cut short due to his drinking (Lyons, 1985: 1-4). While studying at Hirosaki, he published a magazine called *Saibō bungei (Cell Literature)* with his friends, editing several student publications and even contributing some of his works (Lyons, 1985: 24-30). Dazai's writings would come to a sudden halt after his idol, the famous Akutagawa Ryūnosuke³, committed suicide in 1927 (Lyons, 1985: 25). This led to Dazai's first attempted suicide only a year before finishing his studies at Hirosaki. Dazai would successfully finish his studies at Hirosaki the following year, but the death of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and his first failed suicide attempt would present a kind of downfall for the rest of his life, filled with shaky relationships, struggles with alcoholism and drugs, and many more failed suicide attempts, with some ending tragically for his double-suicide partners. Dazai tried to commit suicide a total of five times throughout his life (Lyons, 1985: 10), every attempt explained in detail in *No Longer Human*⁴, ending with his final attempt in 1948. Dazai and Tomie, his mistress at the time, drowned themselves in the Tamagawa Canal, near his house. Their bodies were not discovered until six days later, on June 19, which would have been his 39th birthday (Lyons, 1985: 53).

² Japanese: 津島 修治.

³ Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (芥川 龍之介) was a Japanese writer active in the Taishō period in Japan, regarded as the "father of the Japanese short story." (O'Connor, 1986: 79)

⁴ Japanese: 人間失格, Hepburn: *Ningen Shikkaku*.

1.2. Social context and literary background

Dazai lived through three prominent periods of Japanese history: Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926), and Shōwa (1926-1989), with his literary works belonging to the early Shōwa period. During the late Meiji and Taishō periods, Dazai experienced Japan's rapid modernization and Westernization. These times saw significant social change, political liberalization, and cultural flourishing. Throughout the Shōwa period, Japan went through a variety of changes, including participation in World War II, defeat and occupation, as well as post-war rapid economic recovery and growth. Shōwa period is commonly divided into the pre-war Shōwa period (1926-1945) and the post-war Shōwa period (1945-1989) (Gluck, 1990: 1-26), with Dazai's most significant works, such as *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun*⁵ belonging to the post-war Shōwa period, and his short story *Flowers of Buffoonery*⁶ and a collection of short stories *The Final Years*⁷, belonging to the pre-war Shōwa period. His literary work *The Setting Sun* launched Dazai into popularity, with the title providing a metaphor for Japan's defeat, with the phrase entering the popular vocabulary (Lyons, 1985: 1). Despite his affluent background, Dazai often felt alienated from his family and struggled with expectations, which is reflected in his works' recurring themes of alienation and disconnection from people who surrounded him, and people in general. Dazai experienced significant personal turmoil, including multiple suicide attempts, struggles with drug addiction, and a hectic personal life. His battles with mental health and tuberculosis influenced his writing style and thematic concerns, many times being the main motifs he focused on in his works.

Although Dazai's works never really belonged to any specific literary movements, his autobiographical stories could be categorized within a well-recognized genre, the *watakushi shōsetsu*⁸, or the *I-novel*. While the *I-novel* was not exactly a movement, it was considered a dominant mode in modern Japanese literature since the publishing of Tayama Katai's *Futon* in 1907. The *I-novel* presents stories in which the first-person narrator or the third-person narrative perspective could be identified with the author. The events, concerns, and conflicts depicted in these stories are the author's. The *I-*

⁵ Japanese: 斜陽, Hepburn: *Shayō*.

⁶ Japanese: 道化の華, Hepburn: *Michi-ka no hana*.

⁷ Japanese: 晩年, Hepburn: *Bannen*.

⁸ Japanese: 私小説.

novel tends to be confessional, with the author often wanting to express his feelings, thoughts, and emotions, or maybe even beg for forgiveness, but he is always speaking for himself. Accordingly, the reader is expected to decide if the writer is being sincere in his revelations. Dazai made a special contribution to the genre, a contribution through which he exploited its possibilities more than any writer before him: By taking an ironic step back from himself, he produced what the critics called a parody of the *I-novel*- as if there was a "fourth person" narrator observing the writer observing the character (Lyons, 1985: 7-8).

1.3. Overview of selected works

Dazai is renowned for his deeply introspective works, often filled with themes of death and existential despair, reflecting his own turbulent life and psychological struggles. As previously mentioned, his thoughts and portrayals of death in his literary works are often closely related to his own experiences with death around him and his many suicide attempts, some being double- suicides that ended with the death of only the other participant, mainly Dazai's mistresses at the time. *No Longer Human*, considered Dazai's most famous and widely read work, reflects his deeply personal and autobiographical style. The novel is Dazai's way of exploring the depth of the human psyche and is deeply rooted in Dazai's own life experiences, including his struggles with mental illness, drug addiction, and his disconnection from human beings that surround him.

In *No Longer Human* and *The Flowers of Buffoonery*, the protagonist Ōba Yōzō frequently contemplates the meaninglessness of his life and acknowledges his alienation from society, being unable to form close bonds with his family or even in romantic relationships. This often leads him to consider death as a possible escape from his inner struggles and the pressures of societal expectations that he feels he cannot follow. Same as Dazai, Ōba Yōzō makes multiple attempts at suicide throughout the novel, often expressing that they were a way to find peace. While struggling with depression he tried to find solace in drugs and alcohol, which only exemplified his longing for death.

Dazai's other famous work, *The Setting Sun* also frequently portrays the theme of death throughout its story and characters, although death in this novel mostly carries

a metaphorical meaning. *The Setting Sun* delves deeply into the inevitable decline of the traditional Japanese aristocracy in the post-World War II era, and the theme of death plays a significant role in the narrative. The title of the novel itself paints the picture of the decline of the aristocratic class in Japan, with the once-great noble family facing ruins, just as the setting sun marks the end of the day. The social and cultural death of the noble family is portrayed through the struggles of the protagonist Kazuko and her family as they struggle with the loss of their status and wealth while facing modern changes. The novel also portrays literal deaths, such as those of Kazuko's father and mother, combining them with the image of a snake that appears right before both deaths occur. Kazuko's brother Naoji commits suicide after conveying his personal struggles and struggles with his opium addiction in his journal.

"Cherry Leaves and the Whistler"⁹, portrays the slow deterioration of a young woman, all seen through the eyes of her older sister, struggling to come to terms with the situation. The older sister, who acts as a narrator, describes her sister's worsening condition, even counting down the days before she ultimately dies, creating an atmosphere of impending death.

Humans are aware that death will bring the end of their commitments and obligations, but also their worldly pain and suffering (Carroll, 2019: 3), which is probably the reason Dazai sought peace through suicide most of his life. In *The Final Years*, known to be his first collection of short stories, Dazai expressed his longing for death, as he intended to use the collection as his last will and testament (Lyons, 1985: 39).

1.4. Death and existential crisis in Dazai's works

The concept of existential crisis, also referred to as an identity crisis, is a confusing and high-anxiety period in someone's life when the person in question tries to find an answer to a question of who they are. Existential crisis that is present later in adult life often deals with more complex issues such as mortality, legacy, and achievements in life, while also being an internalized by-product of societal problems (Andrews, 2016: 104).

⁹ Japanese: 葉桜と魔笛, Hepburn: *Hazakura to mateki*.

Ōba Yōzō, the protagonist of *No Longer Human* and *The Flowers of Buffoonery*, and Kazuko, of *The Setting Sun* both experience different forms of existential crisis. Ōba Yōzō struggles with his sense of self and is unable to form meaningful relationships with his family, friends, and mistresses, while Kazuko experiences a crisis relating to her and her family's decaying social status in the ever-changing society. Ōba Yōzō is extremely self-critical with an introverted personality, condemning his existence as unworthy of being categorized as "human" and experiencing convoluted versions of self-loathing on his path of self-damnation. The theme of suicide and death is recurrent and heartbreaking as Ōba Yōzō contemplates death in his worst moments. Two key events in his life greatly contributed to his downfall - one was the double suicide he unsuccessfully committed with a geisha he loved, and the other was the rape of Yoshiko, his trusting wife. In the end, after struggling with alcohol and morphine addiction and losing all sense of self-worth, Ōba Yōzō exclaims that "everything passes."

Death can be observed as a multi-layered theme in *No Longer Human*, *The Setting Sun* and *The Flowers of Buffoonery*, as both literal physical and metaphorical deaths are present throughout the novels. Although Ōba Yōzō survives his multiple suicide attempts in *No Longer Human*, at the end of the book he is left in a state where he feels neither happiness nor unhappiness: just a hollow shell of his former self, pushed into a corner by his miserable life of alienation, depression, and addictions. He is unsuccessful in his multiple suicide attempts, these attempts following periods of extreme sadness and suffering, as he sees death as an escape and relief from the pain he constantly feels. Ōba Yōzō feels like he's losing his humanity as the story progresses, and this, coupled with his emotional and psychological decay, represents death in a metaphorical sense. As time passes his thoughts and even the ways he acts change, to the point he struggles with his understanding of his real self.

I thought, "As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how I'll be all right. If I succeed in that, the human beings probably won't mind it too much if I remain outside their lives. The one thing I must avoid is becoming offensive in their eyes: I shall be nothing, the wind, the sky." (Dazai, 1958: 23)

Yōzō describes himself as a clown, often wearing an imaginary mask and performing silly acts to hide his true feelings and to better appeal to those surrounding him,

explaining that this is the only way he can interact with others without upsetting them. This constant clowning led to his loss of authenticity, which could represent a metaphorical death of his true personality.

The Setting Sun deals with a few physical deaths that are important to the story, Naoji's suicide and the death of Kazuko and Naoji's mother. Naoji, Kazuko's brother was a war veteran struggling with addiction. His suicide was a manifestation of his inability to adapt to the changing and modernizing world around him. Naoji's death represents the destructive impact of the decay of his family's aristocratic status and his despair. The death of Kazuko and Naoji's mother is both physical and metaphorical. Just like the death of Kazuko's father years before, mother's death was also preceded by a visit of a snake, which the family began taking as a sign of upcoming death. Mother's death represents the death of their old way of life, and the family's aristocratic status (Bullock, 2015: 237-239).

In "Leaves"¹⁰, a short story included in the collection *The Finals Years*, death and suicide are mentioned more than a few times. Dazai recollects the memories from his childhood, with the main feelings expressed being depression and his longing for death.

Then he thought, "I fight with this depression all my life, and then to have it all end up in my death!", and he seemed pitiable to himself. He cried; the green fields blurred for a second. He was thrown into confusion, ashamed that he had wept over such a cheap, sentimental matter. (Dazai, 1968: 2)

Since "Leaves" has no definite plot, and is instead a collection of memories that seem to be remembered in flashes, it combines a few different periods of the author's life, with many of them including the thoughts of death, suicide, and depression that were prevalent during his life.

We again encounter the character of Ōba Yōzō in *The Flowers of Buffoonery*, where he is held in a sanatorium after a failed suicide attempt, with the story mainly revolving around his interactions with the people who visit him. While the motif of death in *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun* is deeply serious and tragic, in *The Flowers of Buffoonery*, this topic is approached with a lighter, more humorous tone while still dealing with heavy topics related to the characters' failed suicide attempt. This

¹⁰ Japanese: 葉, Hepburn: *Ha*.

humorous twist on a serious topic can be observed in a scene where Oba's friends visit him, and make jokes about his condition while also wondering about how he's really feeling:

"Is Yo-Yo really okay? "

"You know him. Happy as a clam. "

Kosuge shook his head and smiled, practically elated. "But I wonder how he's really feeling."

"Why not ask him yourself? "

"That's okay. Nothing to say. And besides- he's a mess. "

The two friends snickered. (Dazai, 2023: 12)

Here, Dazai's use of humor in a serious situation can be interpreted in two ways: he is trying to provide relief from the gravity of the situation his character is in, or it could even be a way to highlight the absurdity of life and death. Since he longed for death most of his life, there is the possibility of him not understanding the real gravity of the situation, or what his death would present to those who visited him.

"Cherry Leaves and the Whistler" deals with the upcoming death of the narrator's younger sister, who is sick with renal tuberculosis. Events of the story take place sometime before the sister's diagnosis, where she is given a hundred days before she succumbs to her sickness. The narrator, or the older sister, counts down the days before her sister's demise, making her believe she would go mad with pain.

I reflected that she had only thirty or forty days to live, that this was absolutely certain, it was as if my entire body was being pierced by needles, and I thought I would go mad with the pain. March, April, May ... Yes, it was the middle of May.

I'll never forget that day. (Dazai, 1988: 104)

The passing of time creates suspense in the reader, and this is only heightened by the narrator's growing worries and detailed descriptions of her sister's frail figure and hollow cheeks, creating a clear timeline of the sister's deteriorating beauty.

My sister called to me when I got home. She was by now terribly thin and weak, and she seemed to be becoming vaguely aware that she didn't have long to live. (Dazai, 1988: 105)

This imagery of a young, disease-stricken, beautiful woman can also be seen in the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe.

2. Edgar Allan Poe

2.1. Biography

Edgar Allan Poe was haunted by hardships of life from the moment of his birth, on the 19th of January 1809, in Boston. Poe would grow up saying that his biggest shortage in life was never feeling the "real" parental love since his parents were traveling actors and absent for most of his childhood. His father struggled with alcohol, and this would later become Edgar's downfall as well.

The death of his parents would leave young Edgar in the care of the Allan family (Bonaparte, 1949: 5-7). Edgar developed a strong bond with his foster mother, and he admired both her and his mother, frequently speaking words of praise and pure love when remembering them. These great losses would later fuel his career and his writings, always filled with death and images of young, beautiful, and kind dying women (Ackroyd, 2008: 17). Critics have also looked at this early introduction to loss and grief as an onset for Edgar's literary career, and according to Kenneth Silverman: "Much of Edgar's career [...] may be understood as a sort of prolonged mourning" (Silverman, 1991: 78). At the age of 25, he married his first cousin Virginia and moved to Philadelphia, where he continued working for different magazines, as well as writing some of his well-known works, such as "The Raven" in 1845, which became an instant sensation. Virginia died in 1847, which only made Edgar even more unstable as he spiraled into his heavy drinking habits.

On October 3, 1849, Edgar was found barely conscious in a bar, and he would die only a few days later, on Sunday, October 7, 1849, with his death still shrouded in mystery (Silverman, 1991: 433-437).

2.2. Social context and literary background

Significant changes and challenges marked Edgar Allan Poe's social context during the 19th century in America. Living in cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, Poe experienced rapid industrialization, urbanization, and cultural transformation. Although Poe started his career as a poet, in order to make a living he would turn to writing tales, realizing that he would have to produce what was in demand at the time (Lewicki, 1995: 37-38).

The market for short stories started expanding, and Poe soon realized that most of his readers did not have the time or patience to read bulky novels. Short stories started filling the pages of monthly magazines, and it was there that Poe published some of his earliest tales, later winning a prize for *MS Found in a Bottle* and becoming the editor for the *Southern Literary Messenger*.¹¹ This would be one of his many editorial jobs that he would not be able to keep for long due to his alcohol use. During the short period of his employment at the *Southern Literary Messenger*, he accomplished quite a lot, publishing eighty-three reviews, six poems, four essays, and three short stories (Lewicki, 1995: 38).

In the final and tragic period of his life, Poe continued writing works in which the suspense of the stories is based on strong emotions, such as horror, terror, and grief felt between characters that seem to be the most effective and memorable. Poe was clearly following the European Gothic traditions while adding psychological elements such as his descriptions of various mental states that often verged on the abnormal, feelings of grief, and the theme of death (Lewicki, 1995: 41-43).

During his short life of poverty, absence of parental love, anxieties, and alcoholism, Poe created new symbolic poetry within the small compass of forty-eight poems, formalized the new short story, and laid the groundwork for a new fiction of psychological analysis and symbolism (Lewicki, 1995: 44).

¹¹ *The Southern Literary Messenger* was a periodical published in Richmond, Virginia, from August 1834 to June 1864, and from 1939 to 1945 (Modey, 2015: 208).

2.3. Overview of selected works

Most of Poe's works are filled with motifs corresponding to the Gothic literary traditions (Lewicki, 1995: 42), including the pure Gothic atmosphere filled with macabre elements and a pervasive sense of dread and looming death, as we can closely examine in some of his short stories. Although coping with the death of loved ones may not be an all-consuming thought in most people's lives, through his works Poe showed that it can become a prominent feature of personal experience as he explored this theme in detail (Carroll, 2019: 3).

Poe's "The Black Cat" is filled to the brim with dreary elements, right from the start when the narrator starts explaining to us, the readers, that he is not mad, but then continues to describe in detail all acts of violence and hatred he committed against his cat, including mutilating the cat by gouging out his eye and later hanging a cat from a tree after a drunken night, as this sets the macabre tone for the rest of the story. The story delves deeper into the psychological aspect of death, as the narrator is consumed by guilt and growing paranoia after killing his cat, this paranoia taking the form of a second black cat that starts haunting him. The narrator's crimes ultimately lead to his downfall after the cat's cries behind the wall expose the corpse of his dead wife in front of the police, which leads to his arrest.

"The Masque of the Red Death" adopts many conventions of traditional Gothic fiction, including the abbey setting and the masqued ball. This short story is set in a fictitious kingdom destroyed by a deadly plague known as the Red Death. Prince Prospero and other wealthy nobles attempt to escape death by secluding themselves in a luxurious abbey, where they hold a masquerade ball across seven colored rooms. Each room is illuminated in a specific color, with the last room decorated in black and illuminated with a deep blood-red light avoided by guests almost the whole night because of its eerie feel. Prince Prospero is considered to represent Poe, once again as a young man belonging to a wealthy and distinguished family and enjoying his dream of escaping the harsh world where such things as plague were dominant. He sought to escape into a secluded place of pleasure he himself designed, but like many of Poe's fantasies, this dream would not remain intact as despite all precautions, it would be invaded by Death whose mere sight would ruin him (Regan, 1967: 136).

In other works, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Raven" and "The Cask of Amontillado" we can observe death, again as a prominent motif, expressed differently in each of the works. Both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado" portray death by murder, but the circumstances and feelings revolving around the act differ greatly. The narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is manipulated by the old man's "vulture eye," leading him to murder, even after explaining that he, in fact, loves his victim. The narrator is tortured by his growing anxieties after the murder, which end in his confession. The same cannot be applied to Montresor, the nobleman, and narrator in "The Cask of Amontillado", who commits murder in order to seek revenge against an unspecified insult. Fortunato, the recipient of Montresor's revenge, is entombed alive, even after pleading for his life. At the end of the story, Montresor exclaims that Fortunato's body lay undisturbed for 50 years, thus fulfilling his revenge.

2.4. Death as a dominant motif in Poe's fiction

As Joseph Carroll (2019: 6) writes in his book: "Responses evoked to depictions of death can include virtually any conceivable emotion." Although death can evoke joy or a feeling of calmness, death in Poe's works is filled with a sense of inevitability, fear, and the supernatural, and as Carroll (2019: 6) further states: "Some authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe or Stephen King, seem to have nervous systems hardwired for the production of horror." Poe's portrayal of death is versatile and layered, often reflecting his personal experiences and tragedies, and his fascination with the macabre. In many of Poe's stories and poems death is depicted as an unavoidable fate that no one can escape, regardless of their status, the famous example of this being "The Masque of the Red Death." Prince Prospero's futile attempt to avoid the deadly plague demonstrates that death cannot be avoided even by wealth, power, or isolation.

The motif of death in Poe's works is often followed by supernatural elements and unexplained phenomena, creating an eerie atmosphere with a sense of dread and the unknown. The other black cat, or the look-alike of the narrator's first cat Pluto, awakens the narrator's growing paranoia, as the narrator tries to escape the cat's apparent search for revenge. The look-alike's missing eye, reminiscent of the narrator's mutilation of Pluto, and his white spot assuming the shape of the gallows, feeds into the narrator's growing sense of guilt and his downfall into madness. Pluto's death

becomes a sort of heavy burden in the narrator's life that he cannot get rid of, making him spiral further into madness on each day that passes, ending only in the narrator's further demise when the corpse of his wife is discovered.

As Bradford (2011: 72-100) mentions in his review, Poe uses death to explore the depths of human fear, guilt, and sorrow which critics often connect to Poe's early personal experiences with grief and loss. The culture of mourning in his time, which included elaborate rituals and objects of mourning, deeply influenced his writing. Descriptions of death are widespread in Poe's short stories and vary in different works. Characters that are dying have beautiful lives at the very beginning but draw near death gradually and cannot escape from death even though they have made painful protests. Poe's expressions of death take many different forms throughout his works, from death by suicide to murder or disease.

Murder is the most common form of death in Poe's works, with the narrator assuming the role of a perpetrator most often, providing readers with a detailed account of his thoughts and emotions during the act. There are many works related to murder, like "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Cask of Amontillado," and the aforementioned "The Black Cat." These works portray people who let themselves indulge in the act of killing, killing those around them, and in the end, probably meeting death themselves. In some cases, Poe seems to understand perpetrators' violations and their wishes to indulge in the vulgar desires of murder while, on the other hand, letting disaster fall on those who had given in to those desires. Although Poe does not discuss suicide directly, some works such as "The Raven" deal with profound grief and despair. Here, the narrator's obsessive longing for his lost Lenore can be interpreted as a kind of psychological descent that might lead to self-destructive behavior.

When dealing with physical disease, characters' health tends to deteriorate quickly, taking along their beauty and commonly mental health as well. In his works, most victims of death caused by a disease are female, such as the character of Madeline in "The Fall of the House of Usher." This could also be connected to Poe's early introduction to grief and the loss of his mother to tuberculosis. Women in Poe's stories are beautiful and charming, but when overtaken by disease suffer both physical and psychological damages, with their beauty being stripped from them (Xiaobin, 2014: 176-177).

3. Identification of common themes and motifs related to death in Poe's and Dazai's works

Edgar Allan Poe and Dazai Osamu, two literary giants of their time and even today, although from different periods and cultural backgrounds, both grapple with the theme of death, incorporating it deeply within their works. Despite the differences between their lives and upbringings, their explorations and views of death carry some striking similarities in how they depict the darkest aspect of human life and psyche.

3.1. Motifs related to death in Poe's fiction

In Poe's works, death is omnipresent, surrounding every scene and character, portrayed with a sense of inevitability and paranoia. His fascination with the macabre and the supernatural dominates his works, reflecting his own devastating life experiences and early introduction to grief by losing both of his parents and the women he loved. In "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe illustrates how trying to escape death is useless, as Prince Prospero's attempts to avoid a deadly plague by isolating himself are proven futile as Death itself attends his Masquerade ball, claiming not only the Prince's life but also of all others:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. (Poe, 2023: 176)

The lively ball creates an illusion of safety, which is shattered by the arrival of Death. Death is also much more than a motif in this instance, it is personified as a mysterious masked guest. Although the guests isolate themselves purely to escape death, in the end, Death is presented as a guest that respects no boundaries and takes what it wants, in this case, the lives of all nobles at the ball.

This supernatural aspect is often coupled with psychological elements, creating an atmosphere of dread and fear. In "The Black Cat," the narrator's descent into madness

following the murder of his pet cat Pluto, and later his own wife, portrays the psychological impact of guilt:

When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch—I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed. (Poe, 2023: 184)

One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;—hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart —hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offense;—hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place i—tif such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. (Poe, 2023: 184)

Poe emphasizes the fluctuations in the narrator's feelings, showing the true complexity of human emotions and the impact guilt can have on a person. The narrator expresses remorse for the murder of Pluto, but he also attempts to justify his behavior. In the end, he realizes that his actions have damaged his soul beyond redemption.

Similarly, in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the protagonist, after experiencing overwhelming guilt following the murder he committed, hears the sound of his victim's beating heart, leading to his confession and capture:

Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But any thing was better than this agony! Any thing was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!— hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!— "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart! (Poe, 2023: 181)

The protagonist feels calm at first, showing the police in detail around his house, even offering them a seat, and he himself sitting on top of the boards under which the body of his victim lay. Soon after sitting down, he starts experiencing auditory hallucinations

of a heartbeat, and his fall into madness is evident through his shrieking and fast-paced thinking. Both "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" deal with deaths by murder, with both characters that committed the acts start spiraling into madness because of their inability to deal with guilt and paranoia. In these stories, Poe uses death and guilt that follow committed murders to develop his characters further.

Another story told from the perspective of a murderer is Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" whose narrative follows a person being buried alive by immurement. Montresor invites Fortunato to try Amontillado and leads him to the family vaults that also serve as the catacombs. When they get there, Fortunato notices there is no Amotillado to sample and is instead tricked by Montresor who traps him in the catacombs, later stating that Fortunato's body stayed there undisturbed for fifty years.

You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled— but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity.
(Poe, 1980: 11)

Montresor premeditates the murder of his friend, and even though the exact reason for the murder is not known, the reason might be hiding in Montresor losing his family's prior status and blaming Fortunato for it. The ambiguity surrounding Montresor's motives for revenge acts as an element of psychological terror. Without a clear reason for the revenge, readers are left to think about the nature of Montresor's resentment, while this amplifies the fear of unknown, leading to tension and discomfort. Readers are more disturbed in this case, since they cannot predict the true resentment Montresor feels, this making his actions even more terrifying.

My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. (Poe, 1980: 11)

Montresor's ability to remain calm while sealing Fortunato in the catacombs emphasizes his emotional detachment and control over the situation. His ability to remain composed through the act highlights his sadistic nature, which only amplifies the cruelty of the act when compared to Fortunato's fear and desperate pleas.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Poe frequently depicts death through disease and decay, often affecting female characters. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the physical and mental deterioration of the characters Roderick and Madeline Usher symbolizes the overall decay of their family and estate, contributing to the motif of inevitable death.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character were the unusual diagnosis. (Poe, 2023: 66)

In the story, Poe provides detailed descriptions of decay from disease, and ultimately the death that follows.

3.2. Motifs related to death in Dazai's works

In contrast, Dazai's exploration of the theme of death is deeply rooted in his own struggles with mental illness and addiction, evident in his semi-autobiographical work *No Longer Human*. *No Longer Human* reflects Dazai's battles with alienation and the idealization of suicide, as he thought of it as his only escape. The protagonist Ōba Yōzō reflects Dazai's own sense of worthlessness and his sense that he does not even belong with other humans: "Mine has been a life of much shame. I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being." (Dazai, 1958: 18)

But here again the face fails inexplicably to give the impression of belonging to a living human being. He wears a student's uniform and a white handkerchief peeps from his breast pocket. He sits in a wicker chair with his legs crossed. Again he is smiling, this time not the wizened monkey's grin but a rather adroit little smile. And yet somehow it is not the smile of a human being: it utterly lacks substance, all of what we might call the "heaviness of blood" or perhaps the "solidity of human life"—it has not even a bird's weight. (Dazai, 1958: 15)

The description of Yōzō's student uniform, and the smile that "lacks substance" shows the disconnection from his outward appearance and his inside struggles and thoughts. His smile seems normal but fails to connect to genuine human emotions, so it still cannot be called a smile of a human being.

Towards dawn she pronounced for the first time the word "death". She too seemed to be weary beyond endurance of the task of being a human being: and when I reflected on my dread of the world and its bothersomeness, on money, the movement, women, my studies, it seemed impossible that I could go on living. I consented easily to her proposal. (Dazai, 1958: 60)

After the proposal of double suicide from Tsuneko, Ōba quickly accepted while reminiscing of all the things that make it harder for him to want to continue living. Throughout the novel, Ōba Yōzō struggles with finding meaning and connection in his life, reflecting Dazai's real-life worries and feelings of alienation and inability to form meaningful relationships.

Besides physical death, Dazai also uses metaphorical meanings of death to depict societal changes happening in Japan. In *The Setting Sun*, the decline of the Japanese aristocracy after World War II is reflected in the personal struggles of the protagonist Kazuko and her family, symbolizing the death of their previous life of luxury and wealth. This metaphorical portrayal of death aims to portray closely the cultural shift happening in Japan during that period, relating this metaphorical death to the theme of loss and decay.

From now on I must struggle with the world. I thought that Mother might well be the last of those who can end their lives beautifully and sadly, struggling with no one, neither hating nor betraying anyone. In the world to come there will be no room for such people. The dying are beautiful, but to live, to survive—those things somehow seem hideous and contaminated with blood. (Dazai, 1956: 108)

Throughout the novel, Kazuko portrays her mother as "the last" of the aristocracy, fearing that with her death even the remnants of their former life will die. The death of her mother reflects the passing of the wealthy lives of the Japanese aristocracy in the middle of societal changes, demoting them from luxury to a more frugal way of living that Kazuko's family has trouble adapting to. In that sense, the mother's death is meaningful both as her physical death as well as metaphorical.

About three hours later she passed away ... in the still autumn twilight, as her pulse was being taken by the nurse, watched over by Naoji and myself, her two children, my beautiful mother, who was the last lady in Japan. (Dazai, 1956: 110)

Similar to the character Ōba Yōzō, Kazuko's brother Naoji sees suicide as his only means of escape from his new life of poverty. After hearing of his death, Kazuko reads Naoji's "Moonflower journal," which gives her an insight into his struggles leading to his suicide.

A sensation of burning to death. And excruciating though it is, I cannot pronounce even the simple words "it hurts." Do not try to shrug off this portent of a hell unparalleled, unique in the history of man, bottomless! (Dazai, 1956: 60)

The war. Japan's war is an act of desperation. To die by being sucked into an act of desperationno thanks. I had rather die by my own hand. (Dazai, 1956: 63)

In "Leaves," random flashes of memories from the character's life are described in great detail, many of them connected to death.

The best thing for me to do is die. And not just me. Anyone who subtracts even the least effort from the progress of society- all of us should die. Or do you think there's some scientific law saying no one, even the minus people, may die? (Dazai, 1968: 6)

The feelings of being less than human are evident in this work as well, as many lines indicate that he, the author, should just die. He also includes others in this idea, referring to them as "the minus people."

Both Edgar Allan Poe and Dazai Osamu use the theme of death not only as a means to escape the characters' reality but also to explore deeper psychological and existential themes. Their works share their preoccupation with the inescapable nature of death, the psychological torment of guilt and paranoia, the impact of disease and addiction, and the despair stemming from the character's alienation from other people.

With their detailed depictions of murder, decay, and ultimately death, the readers are forced to feel stronger emotions when reading these works. In the case of Poe, readers feel terror, fear, and never-ending sadness, similar to how Poe felt throughout his life. Channeling these emotions and transferring them to his works is what truly separates his works from many others in the horror genre. With Dazai, the readers are invited to follow his journey from his childhood into adulthood, realizing along the way all the scenarios that led him astray. With his alienation, the feeling of hopelessness and

ultimately drug abuse and suicide, feelings of sadness and desperation grow in the hearts of readers. Characters realized by both Poe and Dazai carry immense psychological depth. They lead turbulent lives that readers get to peek at through the lens of amazing storytelling.

4. Parallel themes and motifs (comparative analysis)

Edgar Allan Poe and Osamu Dazai touch upon many parallel themes and motifs in their literary works. Both authors delve deeply into the human psyche, exploring themes of existential despair, the duality of human nature, and the inevitability of death. Although the impact of these motifs differs slightly from one author to the other, the underlying themes of existential despair and death make their works and the impact they have on their readers similar. Through this comparative analysis, this chapter aims to portray the main parallel themes and motifs that are prevalent in the works of both authors, the main theme being that of death and its inevitability.

4.1. Self-harming actions of characters

For Poe, no evil could compare with alcohol. He had experienced firsthand how alcohol could unleash violent fantasies and sadistic impulses. Although it is well known that Poe struggled with alcohol throughout his life, he never acted upon his suggested darker thoughts, instead acting on them through his characters. During the decay of his disease-stricken wife, Poe began drinking heavily, his drunken state bringing back visions of death and blood that had been hidden in his consciousness since his early age. His writings provided a channel through which he could express thoughts that his real-life principles forbade. Unlike the loving and sweet relationship with his beloved cat Catterina, expressed by many witnesses, here is what we find out about the narrator of "The Black Cat" (Bonaparte, 1949: 461):

But my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol!—and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish—even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper. One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth...
(Poe, 2023: 183)

In "The Tell-Tale Heart" another form of self-harming behavior, obsession, can be observed in the narrator. Same as the beginning of "The Black Cat", the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" starts his story by trying to convince the readers that he is sane, reasoning that his careful calculation of the murder cannot possibly make him crazy.

Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! (Poe, 2023: 177)

For seven nights, the narrator opens the door of the old man's room to shine a sliver of light into his "evil eye," but on the eighth night, the old man awakens, and the narrator shines the light into his eyes. During this exchange, the narrator hears the old man's heart beating louder and louder, and this increases his anxiety and he decides to strike and kill the old man.

We can also acknowledge the same patterns of self-harming behaviors in Dazai's characters, mainly the abuse of drugs and alcohol evident in the character Ōba Yōzō from *No Longer Human*. Following the same pattern of relation between the life of the writer and his works, Dazai was also known to abuse alcohol during his life, as well as thinking it was going to be his downfall. Known for his semi-autobiographical works, he reflected his struggles with alcohol onto the character of Ōba Yōzō.

I was just at the stage where I had come to feel the squalor of drunkenness, and I was overjoyed to be able to escape after such long bondage to the devil called alcohol. Without a flicker of hesitation I injected the morphine into my arm. (Dazai, 1958: 108-109)

Just like Ōba Yōzō, Dazai maintained an irresponsible lifestyle which included multiple suicide attempts, painkiller addiction, and drowning himself in alcohol. This dependent relationship with substances could have also provided Dazai with a sense of escape without having to commit suicide, and this is mirrored in Ōba. This dependence grows, as he requires more drugs to realise his "escape."

I soon came to understand that drink, tobacco and prostitutes were all excellent means of dissipating (even for a few moments) my dread of human beings. I came even to feel that if I had to sell every last possession to obtain these means of escape, it would be well worth it. (Dazai, 1958: 45)

Although in Poe's case, the characters' struggles with alcohol ultimately led them to commit violent crimes, such as the case with the unknown narrator in "The Black Cat" and his mutilation of Pluto, Dazai's portrayal of struggles with alcohol mainly includes the characters' growing realization of their alienation and existential despair.

Substance abuse is also a prevalent motif in *The Setting Sun*, where Kazuko's brother Naoji struggles with alcohol, writing his thoughts in his "Moonflower journal":

I drink out of desperation. Life is too dreary to endure. The misery, loneliness, crampedness—they're heartbreaking. Whenever you can hear the gloomy sighs of woe from the four walls around you, you know that there's not a chance of happiness existing just for you. (Dazai, 1956: 128)

4.2. Existential despair, alienation and guilt

Most of the time, we have little to no exposure to Asian literature, despite it portraying a variety of important themes, such as those of existential crisis and despair. The post-World War II literature in Japan was focused on explaining the everyday experiences of common people, exhibiting universally applicable themes such as inner turmoil, identity crisis and moral dilemmas. One of the most common themes in Dazai's works is the 'self' set against the family and society, often grappling with the heavy burden of existential despair (Tofa, 2022: 2-3). As Andrews (2016: 104-109) explains, existential despair (or existential crisis) occurs when a person tries to answer the question "Who am I?", and is accompanied by high anxiety levels and depression. In *No Longer Human*, Ōba Yōzō struggles with alienation his whole life, and being unable to connect to others on a meaningful level, he struggles with existential despair that affects his daily life. Unable to fit into societal demands, he finds himself lost in the world around him, losing even his own sense of self. He struggles with alcohol and drug abuse but feels guilt for his actions at the same time.

People also commonly speak of the „wound of a guilty conscience.“ In my case, the wound appeared of itself when I was an infant, and with the passage of time, far from healing it has grown only the deeper, until now it has reached the bone. (Dazai, 1958: 48)

Another prevalent motif in Dazai's works is alienation. Dazai struggled with fitting into society from an early age, often using clowning and jokes to approach other people. He used his clowning as a mask to prevent others from seeing his true self, which he felt they would never accept or like. These feelings led to his alienation from others, and him being unable to form meaningful relationships.

That was how I happened to invent my clowning. It was the last quest for love I was to direct at human beings. Although I had a mortal dread of human beings I seemed quite unable to renounce their society. I managed to maintain on the surface a smile which never deserted my lips;.. (Dazai, 1958: 21)

As a child I had absolutely no notion of what others, even members of my own family, might be suffering or what they were thinking. I was aware only of my own unspeakable fears and embarrassments. Before anyone realized it, I had become an accomplished clown, a child who never spoke a single truthful word. (Dazai, 1958: 21-22)

A former wealthy aristocratic family in *The Setting Sun* also experiences deep existential despair throughout the novel as they face the changing of their status and the society around them.

But with the end of the war everything changed, and Uncle Wada informed Mother that we couldn't go on as we were, that we had no choice but to sell the house and dismiss all the servants, and that the best thing for us would be to buy a nice little place somewhere in the country where the two of us could live as we pleased. Mother understands less of money matters than a child, and when Uncle Wada described to her our situation, her only reaction apparently was to ask him to do whatever he thought best. (Dazai, 1956: 25)

Both sisters in "Cherry Leaves and the Whistler" experience alienation, which could be seen as self-imposed, as they never experienced passion because of worrying about the needs of their family first, which is followed by an intense feeling of regret.

But I really wish I'd had a chance to do something bold and reckless with a gentleman friend. I would have liked someone to hold me tightly in his arms. Not only have I never had a lover, I've never even talked with a man-outside our immediate circle, I mean. You haven't either, have you? That was our mistake. We were too sensible. (Dazai, 1988: 111)

This result of their alienation is followed by strong feelings of regret, realised only before the younger sister's early death. Becoming aware that the end of her life is near, the younger sister expresses her regrets, and even fear of her upcoming death.

Robinson (1972: 58) states that "alienation is the condition to which man is most prone" when analyzing the works of Edgar Allan Poe, further explaining that Poe "carried the theme of alienation and victimization to its ultimate conclusion- that man is totally helpless in a universe he has abandoned all hope of understanding." Poe's works often focus on the macabre and the uncanny, highlighting the fragility of human existence. Alienation is also a recurring theme in Poe's works, shown through the isolation of his characters, both physically and psychologically. Poe's works often delve into the depths of human loneliness and madness.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the theme is isolation and lack of human interaction, where the house acts as a place of isolation, with Roderick being mentally unstable. Roderick's isolation and alienation are further increased by his inability to leave the house and his detachment from the outside world.

I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved—in this pitiable condition—I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear. (Poe, 2023: 65)

Guilt can be observed in a few of Poe's works. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the narrator murders an old man because of his "vulture eye" and hides the body under the floorboards. Despite his attempts to appear sane, his overwhelming guilt manifests as auditory hallucinations of the old man's heart beating beneath the floor, and this leads him to confess to murder in front of the police.

In "The Black Cat," the narrator's descent into alcoholism and violence leads him to mutilate and eventually kill his cat, Pluto. Later, he is haunted by a second cat that resembles Pluto and his overwhelming guilt makes him kill his wife.

I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place. (Poe, 2023: 185-186)

4.3. Death and suicide

Each of the authors explored the theme of death in detail in their works, the portrayals of death often reflecting their cultural contexts. Poe's fascination with death and the macabre is evident throughout his works, where death often serves as a central theme and a source of fear, obsession, and sometimes morbid romanticism. In "The Raven," the narrator mourns the loss of his beloved Lenore, and the arrival of the Raven serves as a reminder of her death and that the narrator will never be able to reunite with her. The central theme in the selected works is the death of a beloved, as Poe claimed, "[...] the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." (Poe, 1906: 28)

Around half of Poe's work revolves around beautiful women, mostly separated into two types: a mother figure and a maiden, both closely related to death. The first type reflects on Poe's experiences with women in his life, his mother dying when he was very young, followed by his strong bond with his stepmother, whose death he would also grieve. The second type is believed to be based on his first cousin and wife, Virginia Clemm, and this type appears most often in Poe's works (Vrbat, 2017: 3).

In "The Masque of the Red Death" we observe the motif of the inevitable death, as throughout the story, Prince Prospero and other nobles try to avoid death by isolating themselves in the abbey, only to meet Death itself in the last, black and red ballroom. At midnight, Prospero notices a mysterious figure shrouded in a dark robe, with the figure's mask resembling the rigid face of a corpse. Prospero demands to know the identity of the mysterious guest and follows him with a dagger to the seventh room. When the figure turns to face him, Prince Prospero falls dead, followed by all the other nobles in the abbey.

In "The Cask of Amontillado" death is shown as a means of executing one's revenge, with Montresor luring his friend Fortunato into his family's catacombs and entombing him alive, thus following through with his carefully crafted revenge plan.

Dazai's works are characterized by a tendency to relate and excessive self-consciousness to the temptation of suicide. His first collection of stories *The Final Years* largely comprised of his early works, and was published in 1936. The title of this collection was selected because Dazai intended the volume to be a last testament

before his actual death. "Leaves," the story that opens the collection begins with the following paragraph:

I planned to die. In January I received a New Year's gift of a gray-striped robe. It was clearly a summer kimono. I thought I might as well go on living until summer. (Dazai, 1968: 31, quoted in Ando, 2011: 45)

Like this one, many of the stories in the collection are characterized by representations of death, with Dazai having committed his third suicide attempt at the time, there was a tendency to directly connect the death portrayed in his works to the death he pursued in his actual life. A number of Dazai's writings in high school and university days incorporate death as a motif but in a different sense- as the suffering from being a member of a social class that was destined to disappear in the modernizing Japan.

The Flowers of Buffoonery is a story that has its origins in Dazai's double- suicide attempt, but the narrative is concerned with the aftermath, and cares little about the events leading to the incidents itself. The protagonist, again Ōba Yōzō, is in the hospital after his double-suicide attempt and is asked why he tried to kill himself, and he answers: "To be honest, I don't know myself. Feels like everything's to blame." (Dazai, 2023: 20)

In *No Longer Human*, Ōba Yōzō details a few of his suicide attempts, which can again be connected to Dazai's real-life attempts. His double suicide attempt with Tsuneko left her dead and Ōba Yōzō alive and treated as a suspect. He explains that he did not really think about dying before Tsuneko herself uttered the word "death," and it did not take much to convince him.

She lay down beside me. Towards dawn she pronounced for the first time the word "death". She too seemed to be weary beyond endurance of the task of being a human being; and when I reflected on my dread of the world and its bothersomeness, on money, the movement, women, my studies, it seemed impossible that I could go on living. I consented easily to her proposal. (Dazai, 1958: 60)

We threw ourselves into the sea at Kamakura that night. She untied her sash, saying she had borrowed it from a friend at the cafe, and left it folded neatly

on a rock. I removed my coat and put it in the same spot. We entered the water together.

She died. I was saved. (Dazai, 1958: 61)

In *No Longer Human* death was portrayed as a way of escape, the end shrouded in mystery, and a way to end all of his struggles in life. *The Setting Sun* carries both the literal and metaphorical themes of death, with the most prominent death being that of Kazuko's mother. The death of Kazuko's mother is both literal, with Kazuko explaining her mother's death in detail, but it also carries a strong metaphorical meaning: Kazuko's mother represents the last person of the aristocratic status, and by dying, Kazuko is suddenly struck with the reality of their situation and of the path that the rest of her life would have.

Death appears hand in hand with motifs such as passion and regret in "Cherry Leaves and the Whistler," followed by detailed descriptions of a young woman's decaying health, which draws parallels with Poe's imagery of dying women. In this case, death is expected, and its presence grows stronger with each month that passes, filling both sisters with fear and regret. Becoming increasingly aware of her deteriorating beauty, the younger sister expresses that she does not want to die.

"Ah, I hate the thought of dying. My poor hands, my poor fingertips, my poor hair. I don't want to die. I don't!" (Dazai, 1988: 111)

5. Conclusion

The works of Edgar Allan Poe and Dazai Osamu often reflect on death as a central motif, sharing some similarities in their portrayal of death and dying. Through Poe's works, readers experience death as omnipresent, many times dominating his fiction and providing a sense of darkness and a deeply unnerving atmosphere. In his stories, Poe often portrays death as a result of murder, the experiences explained by the unknown narrators themselves. Death is intertwined with madness and/or alcohol abuse many times, which leads these characters to commit heinous crimes against the people (and pets) they love. Their madness clouds their minds, turning them into selfish creatures capable of committing murder, only to be struck by immense guilt that only takes them closer to their downfall, and frequently their own suggested deaths. Characters in Poe's works are repeatedly tormented by death, feeling its inevitability and heaviness all around them, struggling to comprehend death's heavy burden. Another prevalent use of the motif of death in Poe's works is death by disease, regularly inflicted upon Poe's female characters, reminiscent of the real-life deaths of his mother and other women he loved and which he experienced, some at a very early age. Beautiful, kind, and young women are consumed by sickness which strips them of their beauty and cuts their lives very short.

Dazai's personal struggles with suicide are often reflected in his characters and works, resulting in his detailed explanations of his real-life suicide attempts. Dazai struggled with alienation, unable to conform to societal changes at the time, leading him to consume copious amounts of alcohol and drugs, trying to find another way to escape it all. Ultimately, he would only see suicide as an escape, trying to end his life a total of five times during his life. Unlike Poe, whose works are filled with the looming presence of death, death in Dazai's works is a thought only present in the minds of his characters. They are not troubled by death but instead are troubled by real-life struggles that they feel like they cannot escape, and they turn to suicide as the only way to end their struggles. Poe's characters are shown struggling to comprehend death, with the death of the character's lovers, family, or others lying heavily on their minds and hearts. Some of Dazai's characters are drawn to death, seeing it as the ultimate escape from the burdens of their realities. However, Dazai also portrays inevitable death that is to be feared and regretted. Not only does this create an interesting twist

from many of his notable works that see death as a way of escaping worldly struggles, but it also shows an interesting parallel with some of Poe's works.

Living through the grief, struggling with depression and serious illnesses, followed by the downfall of drug and alcohol abuse, both Poe and Dazai wrote deeply personal and reflective works, often weighted by the motif of death. Taken over by their struggles, they were influenced in their writing, managing to reflect their inner turmoils into heavy and dark topics that are still relevant today, giving us a unique perspective into their respective lives.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the portrayal of death as a central theme in the works of Dazai Osamu and Edgar Allan Poe. Both authors, despite being from different periods and cultures, explored death in their works, mostly influenced by their own experiences. Poe's works are filled with macabre elements, providing an eerie atmosphere and a sense of death as an omnipresent motif. Characters in Poe's works are tormented by the ever-present death, its influences such as guilt and grief lying heavy on their minds. On the other hand, Dazai's works delve into anxieties that resulted from the societal changes happening in Japan. Feeling alienated his whole life, Dazai struggled with expectations from his family and society and fell into a loop of existential despair filled with frequent thoughts of death and suicide, reflected on his characters. Through a comparative analysis, this thesis explores the self-destructive behaviors of characters, existential despair, and the motif of death shared between the works of both authors.

Keywords: Dazai Osamu, Edgar Allan Poe, existential despair, death, suicide.

Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje prikaz smrti kao središnju temu u djelima Dazaija Osamua i Edgara Allana Poea. Oba autora, iako su iz različitih razdoblja i kultura, u svojim su djelima istraživala smrt, većinski pod utjecajem vlastitih iskustava. Poeovi radovi ispunjeni su morbidnim elementima koji stvaraju jezivu atmosferu i uključuju smrt kao sveprisutni motiv. Likove u Poeovim djelima muči sveprisutna smrt, njezini utjecaji poput krivnje i tuge bivaju težak teret na njihovim mislima. S druge strane, Dazaijeva djela istražuju tjeskobe koje su proizašle iz društvenih promjena koje su prevladavale u Japanu. Osjećajući se otuđenim cijeli život, Dazai se borio s očekivanjima svoje obitelji i društva te je upao u petlju egzistencijalnog očaja ispunjenog čestim mislima o smrti i samoubojstvu, što se odrazilo i na njegove likove. Kroz komparativnu analizu, ovaj je rad istražio destruktivna ponašanja likova, egzistencijalni očaj i motiv smrti kao zajedničku temu u djelima oba autora.

Ključne riječi: Dazai Osamu, Edgar Allan Poe, egzistencijalni očaj, smrt, samoubojstvo.