

Introduction

'Here is one of your favourite books. I will read, and you shall listen; and so we shall pass this terrible night together.'

Edgar Allan Poe's short stories are some of the most imaginative in American literature. Many of them examine the dark side of human existence. In his time, Poe was a very original writer and not everyone liked his unusual style, but he is recognised today as the master of horror and the father of the detective story.

Many of his tales are based on his own experiences of fear, sadness and revenge. A very intelligent and gifted writer, he was able to put his experiences into stories that few writers have been able to match. Poe wanted to get away from the tradition of writing stories with a moral; he did not want to tell his readers how they should live. Instead, he wanted to fill them with emotion and he wanted to make them think. Many of his stories communicate a world of terror that comes straight from the depths of his own troubled mind.

His stories have been translated into many languages and are read by people all round the world. The stories in this collection are among the best examples of his writing.

'William Wilson' (1839) is set in England, where Poe went to school. It is a disturbing story about the struggle between the good and the bad sides of a young man's character.

'The Gold-Bug' (1843) is one of Poe's most popular stories, selling over 300,000 copies in the first year after it appeared. Poe won a \$100 prize for the story from Philadelphia's *Dollar Newspaper*. 'The Gold-Bug' shows how clear thinking can make sense of things we do not at first understand. In this case, the clear thinking leads to the discovery of immense treasures.

William Wilson

Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. I am ashamed to tell you my real name, which is known and hated all over the world. Because of my evil life, I no longer enjoy the love and honour of others; and I have no ordinary human hopes or expectations.

I shall not describe the later years of my life, which were full of misery and unforgivable crime. I suffered at one time from a sudden tendency to evil intentions, as all desire for goodness seemed quite suddenly to leave me. Men usually grow evil by degrees, but I passed directly from simple dishonesty to the blackest crime. I want to describe the one chance event that caused this terrible condition. The shadow of death is over me now, and it has softened my spirit. I need the sympathy and perhaps the pity of other people. I want them to look for something in my story that might lessen the shame of my guilt. I hope they will agree that no one has ever before been tempted as I have. It is certain that no one has ever given in to temptation as I have. At this moment I am dying from the effects of a wild and terrible experience.

My family has always produced men of strong imagination and uncontrolled emotion, often of violent temper, and I am no exception. As I grew up, these faults developed and caused serious worry to my friends and great harm to myself. My parents could do little to change my ways, because they themselves had the same weaknesses, and my voice became law at home. Since I was a boy, therefore, I have been able to do very much as I liked.

My earliest memories of school life are connected with a large old house in an English village. I was a pupil at this school for five

years from my tenth birthday. It was at that time and in that place that I experienced the first uncertain warnings of my terrible future. The full and active mind of a child needs no outside interests to amuse it; and my schooldays provided more real excitement than pleasure or crime have ever given me.

The unusual qualities of my character soon gave me a position of leadership among my school friends. I gained influence over all the other boys of about my own age – except for one. This one boy was a pupil who, although not a relative, had the same first name and surname as my own. This was not really very strange, because my name was a common one; in this story I have called myself William Wilson, which is not very different from my real name.

Well, my namesake was the only boy who was my equal in the class, and in the sports and quarrels of the playground. He alone refused to accept my opinions and obey my orders; and he got in the way of my plans at every possible opportunity.

Wilson's opposition annoyed me very much. Although I did not show it in public, I secretly felt that I feared him. I could not help thinking that my endless struggle to avoid defeat by him proved that he was better than I. But none of our companions recognized this; none even guessed that Wilson and I were competitors. I knew that he wanted to keep our struggle private. He did not share the sense of direction or strength of will that drove me on; he wanted no power for himself. His only purpose seemed to be to annoy me and spoil my success. There were times, though, when I could not help noticing that he showed a certain sympathy for me, which was not wholly welcome because it seemed to mean that he was sorry for me.

It was just an accident that Wilson and I started school on the same day; and, as I have said, he was not connected with my family in any way. But I was surprised when I heard by chance,

after leaving school, that he was born on 19 January 1813 – which is exactly the date of my own birth.

Although I was always anxious about Wilson, I did not really hate him. It is true that nearly every day we had a public quarrel, and that he always allowed me to defeat him while at the same time managing to make me feel that *he* had deserved the victory. But although we could never really be friends, we were never violent enemies. It is not easy for me to describe how I felt about him: I disliked him, I feared him, I had some respect for him. But more than anything he interested me.

I soon realized that the best way of attacking Wilson was to make fun of him. But he was not easy to make fun of. In fact I was forced to make use of his one particular weakness in order to stay ahead. This weakness was his voice. For some reason – perhaps a disease of the throat – he could not raise his voice at any time *above a very low whisper*. I showed no mercy, I am afraid, in joking about this unfortunate condition.

Wilson got his revenge in many ways; and he upset me more than I can say. One of his habits was to copy me in every detail, and he did this perfectly. It was an easy matter for him to dress in the way I dressed. He was soon able to copy my movements and general manner. In spite of the weakness in his speech, he even copied my voice. He could not produce my louder sounds, of course, but the *key* – it was exactly mine. After a time his strange whisper became *the perfect model of my own voice*. The success of all this may be imagined when I say that we were the same size, and as alike in appearance as two brothers.

The only comfort that I could find in this situation was that no one else seemed to notice it. Wilson himself was the only one who laughed at me. Why the whole school did not sense his plan, notice it being put into action, and join in the laughter, was a question that I could not answer. Perhaps the success, the perfection of his copy, was what made it so difficult to recognize.

Wilson had another habit that made me very angry. He loved to give me advice. He gave it in a way that seemed to suggest that I badly needed it. I did not like this at all, and I refused to listen. But I must admit now that none of his suggestions were mistaken or unwise. His moral sense was far greater than my own. In fact, I might have been a better and a happier man if I had more often accepted him as my guide.

As it was, I grew more and more to dislike his unpleasant interruptions. But it was not until the end of my stay at the school that I really began to hate him. It was at about this time that I had a strange experience with him. We had had a more than usually violent quarrel, and because he had not expected to see me, he spoke and acted in an unusually open way. I discovered in his voice, his manner and his appearance something which first surprised me and then deeply interested me. I sensed that I had known him before – in some distant past, perhaps, or in some earlier life. The feeling (it was more a feeling than a thought) disappeared as quickly as it came; and I mention it now simply because it was the last time I spoke to him at school.

One night, just before I left the school, I decided to try to play one more joke on him. While everyone was sleeping, I got up and, carrying a lamp, went to Wilson's bedroom. I opened the curtains around his bed, and saw that he was sleeping. I looked – and as I looked a feeling of icy coldness flowed through my body. My legs and arms shook, the blood seemed to leave my head, and I felt sick with fear. Struggling for breath, I lowered the lamp to his face. Was *this* the face of William Wilson? I saw that it was, but I trembled at what I saw. He did not look like *this* – certainly not like this – when he was awake. The same name! The same appearance! The same day of arrival at the school! I thought of his determined and meaningless copying of my walk, my voice, my manner and my habits. Was it possible that Wilson's face, *as I saw it now*, was simply the result of his careful practice in copying

of my own? Shaken and unable to think clearly, I put out the lamp and left the room. Before morning came I had left the school, and I never returned to it again.

A few months later I went to Eton.* This change of scene caused me to forget the other school, and I thought no more about my namesake. I lived a very lazy and aimless life and hardly studied at all. I shall not describe those three wasted years, during which the roots of evil became firmly established. My story moves on to the end of that time. One evening, after a week of hard drinking, I invited a small group of my wildest friends to a secret party in my rooms. The wine flowed freely, but there were other, even more enjoyable and dangerous attractions. The first light of day could already be seen in the east, when the voice of a servant was heard outside the room. He said that some person, who seemed to be in a great hurry, wanted to speak to me in the hall.

As I stepped outside into the shadows, I saw the figure of a youth about my own size. He was dressed in a white coat just like my own. He rushed towards me, took me by the arm, and bent his head to mine; and then I heard the voice, the low *whisper*, 'William Wilson!', in my ear. He raised a finger and shook it violently, as a grave warning. This movement of his brought a thousand memories racing to my mind – they struck it with the shock of an electric current. And then in a moment he was gone.

For some weeks after this event I made many enquiries. I knew, of course, that my unwelcome visitor was my namesake. But who and what was this Wilson? – and where did he come from? – and what did he want with me? But I could find out nothing of importance about him. I learned only that he had left that other school, because of a sudden accident in his family, on the same day that I myself had gone.

* *Eton*: a famous English private school.

A little later I went to Oxford to attend the University. Here the foolish generosity of my parents allowed me to continue a life of wasteful pleasure. And it was at Oxford that I learned the evil art of cheating; this shows how far I had fallen from the state of a gentleman. Actually, it was only the seriousness of this offence that allowed me to practise it. My friends, all of them, would rather have doubted the clearest proofs than have suspected me of such behaviour; for I was the happy, the generous William Wilson.

After I had successfully cheated at cards for years, a rich young man named Glendinning came to the University. He had a weak character and seemed the perfect person for my purpose. I often played with him, and managed to let him win one or two fairly large amounts of money from me. In this way he fell deeper into my trap. At last my plan was ready. I met him at the rooms of a friend who knew nothing about my cheating. There were eight or ten young men present. I carefully directed the conversation until it was Glendinning himself who suggested a game of cards. We played for a long time, and at last he and I sat alone at the table while the rest of the company stood around us looking on. In a very short time Glendinning, who was drinking heavily, owed me a lot of money. Less than an hour later his debt was four times as great. I did not believe, though, that such a loss could account for Glendinning's extreme paleness; for he now looked as white as death. His family, I had heard, was one of the wealthiest in England. I thought that the wine must be affecting him and I was about to suggest that we stopped the game, when I was surprised by some remarks from our friends and a cry of hopelessness from Glendinning. I understood then that I had ruined him completely and that he had everyone's sympathy for his miserable position.

There was silence in the room, and some of those present looked at me angrily. My face was burning, and I do not know

what I might have done, if we had not been suddenly interrupted. The door of the room burst open, and a violent wind blew out the lamps. Their light, as it died, showed us that a stranger had entered and was now standing among us. And then we heard his voice.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, in a low, clear and never-to-be-forgotten *whisper*, which brought a lump to my throat, ‘I am sorry for this interruption, but it is a duty. You do not know the true character of the person who has tonight won a large amount of money from Lord Glendinning. I advise you to examine the inside of his coat.’ Then he left the room as quickly as he had entered. How can I describe my feelings? How can I explain that the *feeling* of guilt is a thousand times worse than the fact? But I had little time for thought. Many hands roughly seized me, and the lights were relit. A search followed. All the picture cards necessary for the game that we had played were found in a large pocket on the inside of my coat. Several sets of cards carefully arranged to give me a definite advantage were found in other inside pockets.

My friends received this discovery with silent disbelief, and their silence troubled me more than any burst of anger would have done.

‘Mr Wilson,’ said our host at last, ‘we have had enough of your skill at cards. I hope you will leave Oxford. In any case, you will leave my rooms immediately.’

Early the next morning, experiencing the bitter pain of shame, I began a hurried journey to Paris.

But I could not escape. In Paris Wilson again interrupted my affairs. Years went by, and I still could not lose him. In Rome – at the height of my success – he stepped in again! In Vienna, too – and in Moscow! I ran again; he followed; to the ends of the earth I ran, but *could never be rid of him*.

Whenever Wilson involved himself in any action of mine, he did so with a single intention: to prevent some plan which might

have caused serious harm. I gained no comfort from knowing this. I felt only anger over the loss of my natural freedom of action. He had continued, for very many years, to copy my dress. But I had not once since we were at school together seen his face. Whoever he was, whatever he was, the hiding of his face seemed to me the greatest foolishness. Surely he knew that I recognized him? He could not fail to understand that, to me, he was always the William Wilson of my schooldays – the hated namesake, companion, competitor. But let me hurry to the end of my story.

By this time I had become a heavy drinker; and the effect of wine on my temper caused me to lose all patience with my namesake. I was in Rome in the year 18—, and I decided to suffer no longer. One evening I attended a dance at the home of a rich man of good family. He was a gentleman of great age, who was married to a young, happy and beautiful wife. I had arranged to meet the lady in the garden; I will not tell you the shameful purpose of my plan. I was hurrying there when I felt a light hand on my shoulder, and heard that low, ever-remembered *whisper* in my ear.

I turned on him angrily and seized him by the collar. He was dressed, as I expected, exactly as I was, and we both wore swords. His face was entirely covered by a mask of black silk.

‘Devil!’ I shouted, ‘you shall trouble me no longer! Show me your sword!’

He paused for a moment. Then, slowly, he prepared to defend himself.

It was soon over. I was wild with every kind of excitement. I felt that I could have fought an army. In a few seconds he was at my mercy, and I drove my sword repeatedly through his chest.

At that moment I thought I heard a footstep behind me. I looked around, but there was no one there. I then turned to my dying enemy. I cannot in ordinary language describe the terrible

fear that filled me when I looked at him. He was very pale, and there was blood on his clothes. But in spite of these things, I could see that every mark and every line of his face, every thread of his dress, was in the smallest detail *my own!*

It was Wilson; but he no longer spoke in a whisper. I might have imagined that I myself was speaking while he said:

'You have won, and I have lost. But, from now on you too are dead – dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! You existed in me – and this body is your own. See how completely you have, through my death, murdered yourself.'

Sample pages