

MYSTERY THROUGH DEATH, HORROR AND MADNESS IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE TELL - TALE HEART"

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Abstract

A short story is a work of fiction that is usually written in prose, often in narrative format. This format tends to be more pointed than longer works of fiction, such as novels. The short story is the most recent of all literary forms. It is the only mode in which American writers were privileged to participate from the very beginning. Short story as a literary form is a form developed in the nineteenth century. The American writer Edgar Allan Poe is the first to use the term 'short story' to describe his collection of prose narratives which was usually known as a 'tale.' The early American writer Washington Irving saw his own early tales as pictorial representations of places and events, and called them 'sketches.' Both the 'sketch' and 'tale' have been absorbed into our modern concept of the short story. Early innovations in the genre appeared in the short fictional prose of such writers as Prosper Merimee. Edgar Mystery fiction has since become one of the most popular of the literary genres. Mystery fiction is a genre in literature that focuses on someone solving a puzzle or a crime. It is also commonly referred to as crime fiction or detective fiction. The genre includes novels and short stories that are written for a special kind of audience, because people who read mysteries expect the standard rules for the genre. The standard rules are: a realistic, yet suspenseful plot with a lot of twists; a shocking, yet realistic crime; foreshadowing evidence; false leads; a clear crime solver; the protagonist or detective; an unexpected villain, criminal, or culprit; The mystery remains a suspense until the very last minute and for the most part things will reveal only in the end.

Keywords: Mystery death, horror, madness, hypersensitivity, self-centeredness, vulture, psychoanalysis, insanity, loneliness, nemesis.

In incognito, the narrator tries to confess that he has murdered an old man while defending his sanity. He starts to narrate the story by addressing the header that he is nervous but not made. Neither passion nor desire for money motivated him to kill the old man but he claims a fear for the old man's pale blue eye. He keeps insisting that he is not crazy and a madman. He regularly, though secretly, observes the old man sleeping in his apartment every night. This becomes his routine for a week, but then the narrator decides that the time has come to kill the old man.

The narrator decides to stall the old man on the eighth night. He remains still as the old man sits frightened and cries out. The lonely terror of night frightens the old man and then the narrator listens to the dull pounding of old man's terrified heartbeat. This makes the narrator nervous he attacks and kills the old man as he is worried about the neighbor. The horror strikes the narrator and seeps his cool as he clears off the evidences. He dismembers the body and hides below the floorboards in the bedroom. Even a drop of blood is not left on the floor when the clock strikes four. At the same time, he realizes that police have arrived when he hears a knock at the street door. Without acting suspiciously the narrator leads the officers all over the apartment.

The police men do not suspect a thing as the narrator brings them into the old man's bedroom, the scene of the crime. This proves his bravado, but then he starts to faintly panic as he starts to hear a low thumping sound. He pictures the low sound as the old man's heartbeat pounding away beneath the floor boards. He becomes uncomfortable as he believes that the policemen might also hear the sound and know his guilt. With their pleasant chatter, the policemen try to mock the agony of the narrator, who is driven mad by this idea and confesses to

the crime. “Tell Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s shortest stories that provide a study on paranoia and mental deterioration. Poe ransacks the story with unadorned entities to highlight the murderer’s obsession to the old man’s eye, the heartbeat, and his own claim to sanity. Poe’s economic style and pointed language thus contribute to the narrative content, and perhaps this association of form and content truly exemplifies paranoia. Even Poe himself, like the beating heart, is complicit in the plot to catch the narrator in his evil game.

To exemplify the paranoia, this story illustrates a murder plot that contributes to the psychological contradictions. For example, the narrator admits, in the first sentence, to being dreadfully nervous, yet he is unable to comprehend why he is mad. He articulates his self-defense against madness in terms of heightened sensory capacity. Unlike the similarly nervous and hypersensitive Roderick Usher in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, who admits that he feels mentally unwell, the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” views his hypersensitivity as proof of his sanity, not a symptom of madness. This enables the narrator to tell this tale in a precise manner as Poe uses the stylistic tools of narration for the purposes of his own sanity plea. However, what makes this narrator mad and most unlike Poe is that he fails to comprehend the coupling of narrative form and content. He masters precise form, but he unwittingly lays out a tale of murder that betrays the madness he wants to deny.

The uneasy and tension between narrator’s capacities for love and hate justifies the another contradiction to the story. Poe explores a psychological mystery that was laid a century before by Sigmund Freud who made it leading to a concept in his theories of the mind. In this story, the narrator is not a greedy or vengeful person yet he claims to have loved the old man. The narrator fixates on the old man’s pale blue vulture like eye to inspire such a violent murder. He insists to separate the man from his “Evil Eye” so he can spare the man as a proclamation for his own sanity. In an obsessive fashion, the guilt that he attributes, he fails to see that the eye is the “I” of the old man, an inherent part of his identity that cannot be isolated as the narrator perversely imagines. The murder of the old man illustrates the extent to which the narrator defines the old man’s eye completely separate from his identity and as a result, he is capable of murdering him while maintaining that he loves him. The evil-eyed narrator does not accept that this will end the man’s life. His conception of the old man’s eye is separate from the man confirms the many parts that the narrator plans to dismember the old man. That strategy turns against him when this mind imagines the other parts of the old man’s body working against him.

The narrator’s newly heightened sensitivity to sound ultimately overcomes him as he is unable to prove to distinguish between real and imagined sounds. Because of his warped sense of reality he hears the low beats of the man’s heart yet shows little concern about the man’s shrieks, which are loud enough both to attract the neighbours and the police to the scene of the crime. The police do not perform a traditional, judgemental role in this story. Ironically, they are not terrifying agents of authority or brutality. Poe’s interest is less in external forms of power than in the power that pathologies of the mind can hold over an individual. The narrator’s paranoia makes it inevitable that he will give himself away. The police arrive on the scene to give him the chance to betray him. The more the narrator proclaims himself cool, the more he cannot escape his own heart when he mistakes of the beating of the old man’s heart. When he confesses to the police in the final sentence, he addresses them as ‘villains’ indicating his inability to distinguish between their real identity and his own villainy.

With his “Tell-Tale Heart” Poe offers fascinating material to scholars all over the world. The interesting narrating structure of the text provides a few pieces of information that gives room for several possibilities of examination and interpretation in diverse directions. Poe’s art of writing is based on the knowledge of traditional rhetorical hand books, especially on Hugh Blair’s *Rhetoric and Belles Letters*; he adapts some of Blair’s ideas to create a solid structure of his tales, including The “Tell-Tale Heart”. By examining “The Tell-Tale Heart” some typical parts of classical oration is found.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” shows a narrator being driven mainly by his ego. The narrator starts out by claiming that he is not mad and continues to make this claim throughout the story using a logical approach. As his story continues it clearly shows opposite of it what he claims but the narrator seems to refuse that he is insane and uses many arguments to prove it. The narrator is

fixed on doing his crime with caution but in the end, his ego causes him to confess his deed. When one first reads they are inclined to feel that it is his ego controlling him, but when it is looked closer, more evidence seems to point that his ego is more in control. This does not say that his id and superego has any role in his action, for clearly they does, but the id and the super ego only play a small part in the narrator's thoughts. From the beginning of the story it is clear that the narrator's ego is in control. The last few sentences in the first paragraph clearly show this. The disease had sharpened my senses not destroyed not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (TTH 40) Logically speaking a mad man would not be able to a recount a murder. One critic refers to the narrator as being "an egocentric who derives pleasure from cruelty." (Pritchard 144). This idea of the narrator being egocentric (or self-centered) is supported by another critic who says that he shows the stages of "Ego-Evil" (Ki 25). The narrator shows his self-centeredness when he says, I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture - a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees -very gradually - I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (TTH 40) He is clearly obsessed with the eye and what it means to him has no regard for the old man. The narrator adds to his self-centeredness through the boasting in his much caution and declaring, "But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded with what caution with what foresight with what dissimulation I went to work!"(40-41). towards the end his ego-centric self-causes him to confess his crime to the police, since he feels they are mocking at him. The narrator's ego-centric personality is shown throughout the story. The way he tells the story even shows it. From his boasting of the different aspects he does to the manner in which he speaks of his deed, clearly shows that he cares little for the old man as long as he kills him. His ego-centric personality ends up with his confession.

Symbolism is the use of specific objects or images to represent abstract ideas an arbitrary sign. It involves using an object, a person, or an action to represent a quality, an attitude or a value. Symbolism is presented in the "Tell Tale Heart" which is the most essential device to break mystery. Every story of Poe is a store house of symbols that evolve with revealing conscious and unconscious aspects of mystery and terror. One can find four main symbols in the tale which are the old man's eye, the watch, the lantern and the bedroom.

The major symbol in this narrative short story is the old man's eye which is the reason for killing the old man. The eye may symbolize evil as he says; "the evil eye" or it may represent the relationship between the old man and the narrator. Here, the narrator describes the old man's eye as "a vulture, a pale eye, with a film over it" (27). The vulture like eye of the old man is the cause that drives the narrator to murder. As he says, "Whenever it [the eye] fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees very gradually-I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (27). Since the old man's eye makes him extremely uncomfortable and anger, he feels there is an urgent need to get rid of the old man's vulture-looked eyes. The eye is symbolized by different critics. Pitcher mentions that the eye is the same as the "I" due to their common sound - so the murderer and the victim are in fact both the same person. Thus the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" symbolically kills his reason and intellect. The old man with his "Evil Eye" is the personified moral and intellect separated from the speaker (Kennedy 2005). Kirkland, on the other hand, claims that the usage of the Evil Eye is based on the old belief that some people can harm others physically or mentally with their vicious look. This myth is widespread and occurs in some cultures where Poe lived for some years and possible for him to hear such tales. The beating of the heart reflects the narrator's guilt. He does not feel guilty to tell the audience of his previous happenings. At first he hears the heartbeat which he hears is guilty feeling. According to the narrator, at the beginning, it is "a low, dull, quick sound." (TTH 31) But later, the sound increases, and it becomes "quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant" (31), as the old man's terror grows more and more intense. After the old man has been killed, the narrator can still hear his heartbeat particularly when the police come. His head aches and face grows pale as the sound increases, too. In fact, what he hears is the reflection of his mental condition. When people do something bad or wrong, their deeds are

known by others and it is no longer a secret. It is guilt at play and is how the narrator feels. At last, the noise of the heartbeat is too loud for him to endure. He feels guilty and he cannot bear it so and he confesses his crime to the police.

Poe loves clocks and watches which can be seen in his short stories; “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Pit and the Pendulum” Clocks, and time symbolize the approach of death according to Poe. In the “Tell Tale heart” the watch is being mentioned several times. As we know a watch is the observer of time and the time is to examine death, each moment of the watch symbolizes a movement closer to the inevitable death that all humans face. As Poe says: “A watch’s minute hand moves more quickly than did mine” (28). The narrator compares himself to a watch, a watch watching the old man death and controls the time of his death. So we can say that he’s walking “ death watch F: At this second it was very clear he was still sitting up in the bed listening; “just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall” (29). The word “watch” also is mentioned other times in this story: “—Now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” (31). The old man’s heart is also a watch; the sound of this heartbeat haunts the narrator, he has killed the old man but he lives in the narrator mind. It shows his guilt and insanity.

The psychological state of the narrator makes the mystery less opaque for a reader of the story by references to Freud’s theory of Psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis theory is one that studies and analyzes the psychological story. The mysterious diction of the narrator and his repeated pleas to the reader “How, then, am I mad?” and “but why will you say that I am mad?” (27) only support the doubt that he is mentally ill. Beyond his manic monologue, there is the narrator’s scary attention with the old man’s eye as further proof of insanity. The description of the eye “a pale blue eye, with a film over it” (27), vexes the narrator which suggests a reason to murder the old man. The terror on this story shows both internal (the mind of the narrator) and external (the horrific murder). This horror story is actually about the end of two men. It is not just a masterful portrait of madness but an example of how guilt can make a crazed man even crazier. The narrator asserts that “I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell” (27)

In “The Tell-Tale Heart” the narrator-protagonist displays typical indications of partial insanity or “moral insanity.” On the one hand, he retains his rationality in “calmly” telling the story, premeditating the crime, cunningly carrying it out and trying to hide it; but on the other hand, he displays “dreadful” nervousness, the need of a rational motive for killing the old man as he says: “The old man had never wronged me. He had never given me insult” (27). The illogical fear of the old man’s eye which he regards as an “Evil Eye” depicts the narrator’s obsession with an odd idea As he says: “It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived it haunted me day and night” (27). As one reads the story, it is known about the old man only through the narration of the insane protagonist. We can say that there is a kindness in the old man and the narrator and especially when he claims that he loves the old man and that he had never wronged him; “—I loved the old man. (27). But the narrator kills him! How would a person kill someone he loves? However the reason behind this crime is the old man’s odd, pale blue eyes that trouble the narrator: “I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture a pale blue eye, with a film over it” (27) Although, the old man is apparently quite rich for he had ‘treasures’ and ‘gold’ the narrator has no desire for his gold. The narrator realizes that his companion is about to kill him. The narrator claims that he too knows this horror very well. “I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt” (30).

As for Poe’s tales and the time frameworks established in them, most of the tales take place either in an undetermined time framework of Poe’s century, “Time” is a secondary theme in the story. It is notable that the action in this narrative occurs mainly during one long night, the numerous references the narrator makes to time show that the horror he experiences has been building overtime. “The Tell - Tale Heart” is jammed with reference to time and clocks. One could say it is obsessed with time. According to the narrator ; “it took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed”(28). This mystery time management technique suggests extreme loneliness. One learns later that the narrator has problems sleeping at night. “And this I did for seven long nights every night just at

midnight” (28). The narrator is reminding us that we are in a gothic tale where all bad things have to wait until just of her midnight before they can play. The narrator sees himself as a kind of clock, counting on the old man’s death. Yet after killing the old man, the narrator says that for many minutes, the heart beat on. He repeats his comparisons of the heartbeat to a ticking watch whose unrelenting sound drives him to confer to the police. “It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night” (27). If the narrator thinks about inventing a cure for cancer or something, this tunnel vision might be a good thing. Here his version of reality is dangerous to himself and others. “Do you mark me well, I have told you that I am nervous: so I am” (31). The narrator obviously does not think nervousness is a component of madness; it also seems separate from this disease”Hearken! And observe how healthily how calmly I can tell you the whole story”(27). It is understood that that narrator is strong and healthy person, but as we read the story we find that he is saying the opposite, “The officers are satisfied. My manner had convinced them” (33) It is questioned if the narrator outsmarted the police officers, or are they hanging out with the narrator because they suspect him? It is really a strange thing. “And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it - oh so gently!”(28). If the old man leaves his door unlocked, it means he trusts the narrator, but the result is that the narrator is not to confide: and every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night” (28). This strange person as he is not the same one at the night and especially at midnight, he is not kinder to the old man, but in the morning he changes, and he speaks to the old man, calling him by name and courageously, asks him how he passed the night. “I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (27)

The old man is old probably he is going to die but the narrator kills him not to get rid of him but from his pale eyes. “All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim” (30). This is an odd sentence. At first it seems that narrator is simply personifying Death. He’s also referring himself to Death with Capital D- the nemesis of the “Evil Eye”. The narrator is the Stalker, and his shadow is black. “It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed and this I did for seven long nights - every night just at midnight” (28). It seems that Poe reminds us that we are in fact in gothic tale, where all bad things have to wait until just after midnight before they can play. “A watch’s minute hand moves more quickly than did mine” (28). This is an amazing line in which the narrator sees himself as a clock, counting down to the old man’s death.

It can be said that Edgar Allan Poe uses the gothic mystery and oddity to serve his specific style of writing and to make sense of fear in this story. His motives behind the use of these elements are to make the reader feel and live the story as it is real. Edgar Allan Poe achieves the effects of mystery and oddity through not only the content and by the use of language, but also he creates atmosphere of Mystery and oddity, in his sentence structures and diction. Poe’s story is a psychological tale of inner struggles and madness.

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