

"tell tale heart" by allan poe essay sample

[Literature](#)



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Review of literature

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" provides an engaging premise-the murder of a beloved old man by his housemate-and provokes readers into an exploration of the true motivation for that crime. The narrator makes reference to "the disease" that had "sharpened [his] senses" but remains firm in his question, "[W]hy will you say that I am mad?" (Poe 303). The actions of the narrator, combined with his insistence that he is not mad, lead readers to determine that he must suffer from some psychological disorder; however, it has been suggested that it is not the idea but the form of his madness that is of importance to the story (Quinn 234).

Upon close examination, a sadomasochistic element emerges, although, as one critic points out, it is sadomasochism "made acceptable to a mass readership by the elimination of any ostensible sexual element" (Symons 210). Imbedded in the tale is the psychological journey of an egocentric that derives pleasure from cruelty. (Fludernik 75-95) Although Poe remains covert in any presentation of sexual analogy, "the narrator begins [the tale] with language of penetration" (Dayan 225). He speaks of the murder as a "conceived" idea that "entered" his brain (Poe 303). This sexually charged language continues as the narrator describes the ritual that preceded the murder: "And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head [...] I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in!" (303). In addition to the language, the setting of the ritual and murder, a bedroom, only furthers the notion that this is a psychosexual tale. Finally, the narrator confesses, "I loved the old man" (303). Fascinatingly, a

dichotomy is created between the raconteur's love for and his wish to slay the old man. (Zerweck 151-78)

Indeed, the narrator exists as a bipolar being, divided by his love for and desires to kill the same man. As Wilhelm Stekel noted over seventy years ago, it is this "coupling of love and hate [that] forms the basis for sadomasochism" (2: 408). Congruous with the idea that "the sadist suffers from a fixed idea" (2: 408), the eye becomes the narrator's obsession (Symons 211), for what the narrator hates about his victim is his eye. What links sadomasochism to obsession is the "compulsion to repetition" (2: 408), which manifests in the story as a voyeuristic tendency, "for seven long nights," to look "in upon [the man] while he slept" (Poe 303). Further suggestion for a sadomasochistic reading emerges from Stekel's comments that "the sadist strives for a total annihilation of the object," and "every sadist is a murderer" (Stekel 2: 407).

The narrator seems proud of carrying out his crime. He brags about "how healthily-how calmly [he] can tell you the whole story" (Poe 303). It is this egocentrism from which "the pleasure in cruelty [is] manifested by civilized man" (Stekel 1: 28). Since cruelty requires "the consciousness of cruelty, joy in another's hurt, delight in a sense of power over another's life" (1: 27), it is not surprising that the narrator admits that he "could scarcely contain [his] feelings of triumph" (Poe 304), and although he "knew what the old man felt," he "chuckled at heart" (304). He further admits that the night of the murder led him to, for the first time, feel the "extent of [his] own powers" (304). The narrator not only receives pleasure from the act of murder itself,

but also from the obsessive ritual that precedes the murder. (Fludernik 75-95)

Sigmund Freud observed that " a sadist is simultaneously a masochist" (Qtd. in Weinberg and Kamel 30). Poe's narrator discovers truth in the notion that " every pain contains in itself the possibility of a pleasurable sensation" (30). Because the narrator experiences a " merging of himself and his victim" (Quinn 236), it can be inferred that he also experiences the pain that he inflicts. As Patrick Quinn points out, the narrator admits, " I know what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart" (235), yet despite this empathy, he carries out the crime. Quinn offers the example of the lantern as a symbol for the man's eye to explain the merging of the characters (235). He maintains that the narrator " used the lantern to project a beam of light that filled the old man with terror, and in this way executioner and victim exchanged experiences" (235). Indeed, the narrator " later tells the police that the scream heard during the night was his own, ' in a dream'" (236). Although the scream is the old man's, the narrator seems unable to separate himself from the victim.

This idea solidifies when one recognizes that the beating heart that the narrator hears in the end is not his victim's, but his own. Because it is apparent that he experiences a " collapse into oneness" (Dayan 144) with his victim and that he finds pleasure in his deed—he " smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done" (Poe 305), one may infer that the pleasure he feels is not only for inflicting pain but for receiving it as well. A psychotic illusion is another significant cause of the outcome of the story. There are many different illusions that the narrator gives to the readers to visualize. One of <https://assignbuster.com/tell-tale-heart-by-allan-poe-essay-sample/>

the illusions or physical manifestations that the narrator gives the readers is the illusion of the virtual eye on the old man. (Grice 41-58)

Poe writes, " I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture" a pale, blue eye with film over it" (1). The narrator gives the readers a visualization of a filmy pale, blue eye on the old man that he wants to discharge of. Also, Kopley quotes that " The mad narrator seems dammed at the beginning of the story; having heard many things in hell, and the Evil Eye apparently recognizes his damnation" (5). The narrator also gives another psychotic illusion of the sound of an interminable heartbeat. Once the narrator psychotically visualizes the heartbeat is that the sound causes the narrator to have an overwhelming sense of guilt, which eventually leads to the outcome of the story.

The last cause that leads to the effect or outcome of the story is psychotic behavior of the narrator. There are many different psychotic and bizarre behaviors that the narrator shows the readers at the end of the story that he is actually insane, but only one really stands out. The major psychotic behaviors in the story are a repetition of behaviors, which is the seven nights of sneaking in on the old man. The narrator or madman behaves repeatedly sneaking for seven nights, in which he places his head in the chambers of the old man with the evil eye each night tentatively. (Grice 41-58)

He also shines a light upon the old man's evil eye so that the madman might be able to see it. Nevertheless, on the eighth night of the lurking the madman is more cautious than ever before, but the sound of his chuckling voice startles his sleeping victim. Kopley quotes " The young man open his

lantern stealthily and shines it upon the Evil Eye, then jumps into the room and kills the old man because of his Evil Eye and his loudly beating heart (3). The murderer (narrator) then mutilates the body into pieces. Then, the madman places the body under the flooring of the chamber. Shortly after the murder, three men come into the old man's chambers and charmingly introduce themselves as policemen. The policemen explain to the narrator that there had been suspicion of foul play. Then, the narrator smiles and explains that the shriek was his own dream. (Fludernik 75-95)

Next, the policemen were satisfied because the narrator had convinced them, but they continued to ask him questions. In the process of the policemen-asking questions, the narrator grew weary and very pale. He was anxious that the policemen might know of his crime. Last but not least, the narrator then hears his victim's heartbeat again that Poe quotes becomes "louder! Louder! Louder! Louder!" (3). Due to the narrator overwhelming sense of guilt of his murder, he shouts his confession to the police. At last, the reader feels the narrator's great psychosis.

Zimmerman quotes "The author, Poe, puts various rhetorical figures of speech and thought, as well as argumentative appeals, into the narrator's explanations of the horrible events he has initiated, and then Poe sits back with his perceptive readers to watch the narrator fall short in his attempts at persuasion" (2). In the "Tell-Tale Heart," Poe gives us a story with an unreliable narrator, which turns out to be insane. This "tale of conscience" provides the readers of the narrative a psychological excitement and dismay. The thrill is caused by a variety of factors that evenly leads up to the outcome.

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The factors are in progressive order in which the narrator's actions cause the effect. The narrators actions are the psychotic thinking of the narrators, his psychotic illusions, and last, but not least his psychotic behavior. These progressive actions eventually lead up to the outcome in the story, which is the murder of the old man and also the proof that the narrator is actually insane. Again, "The Tell-Tale Heart" deals with psychological realism as well as exposing the dark side of humankind. (Olson 93-109)

As the criminal sits and answers the officers' question "cheerily," pleasure fades, and he begins to talk "more freely to get rid of the feeling" (306). He becomes convinced that officers who "chatted pleasantly, and smiled" (306) were "making a mockery of [his] horror" (306). Fittingly, he views the officers as sadists taking pleasure in his pain.

What readers witness is the culmination of the narrator's psychological journey? It is said that "death wishes are a source of the consciousness of guilt" (Stekel 1: 26) and that "the phenomenon of 'pleasure in pain' leads [...] persons [...] to] accuse themselves unwarrantably of most serious crimes, in order to receive the punishment dictated by the unconscious" (2: 161). The criminal does not have to confess because "the officers were satisfied [...] he had convinced them" (Poe 306). Yet, his heart cannot take it, so he "admit[s] the deed" (306), thus self-inflicting his punishment.

Egocentrism is at the heart of sadomasochism: "men want to feel like they are better than they are" (Stekel 1: 7). Perhaps this explains why the narrator goes into such detail about how perfect his crime is. He comments, "You should have seen how wisely I preceded-with what caution-with what

foresight" (Poe 303). However, in the end, he cannot accept that he gets away with the deed. Perhaps his confession represents a sadomasochist's "return to reality after this excursion into the fantastic" (Stekel 1: 21). Certainly, as "every delight craves eternity" (1: 4) it makes perfect sense that the narrator would speak his deeds—he must tell his tale so that it can be immortalized in ink. Knowing that his story will live on is the final step that the narrator must take to receive pleasure from his cruelty. (Fludernik 75-95)

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