

# Edgar allan poe's the tell-tale heart and the decline of sanity throughout

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## **Poe and Disintegrating Sanity in “ The Tell-Tale Heart”**

Edgar Allan Poe is commonly regarded as a master of horror short stories, wherein many of his narrators experience signs of insanity. His story “ The Tell-Tale Heart,” which conveys a man committing a foul murder, exemplifies Poe’s ability. In this story, Poe uses a first-person narrative account as well as a varying choice of phrases and punctuation to demonstrate the disintegration of the sanity of his narrator.

“ But why will you say that I am mad?” (Poe 354). Within the first sentence of Poe’s plot, readers can easily infer that the narrator is indeed mad, the narrator will be attempting throughout the story is to prove that he is not gone. His recollection of his crime fails to defend his sanity - he manages to convince his audience of his insanity instead. Calm in demeanor, the narrator appears to be able to explain the murder of the old man with “ the eye of a vulture” (354) logically. Evidence of his decreasing sanity exists in his actions and in the way he speaks of the events.

The second paragraph begins with the idea of murder entering the narrator’s brain and consuming his thoughts. The narrator, however, does not know “ how first the idea entered [his] brain” (354). The unnamed idea consumed the narrator and filled him with an unknown rage. As the he continues to brag about his deed, the narrator reveals that the eye of the old man fills this stalker with rage. He now reveals the idea to murder the man to rid the narrator of the vulture eye. This event in the narrator’s recollection shows the beginning of the decline of the man’s sanity. An eye is leading the man

to want to murder an old man that he admits he loves. This descent into insanity is continued as the narrator prepares and plans the murder. The narrator “ was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before [the narrator] killed him” (354), and he considers his process to be wise. He regards his work as cunning, wise, and cautious. He is not able to complete his task however, as he finds the vulture eye closed every night. The narrator is not willing to kill the man; he simply wants the eye out of his life. This reluctance to murder the old man further demonstrates the man’s insanity. He is not murdering the man just to kill; he wants something very specific out of the murder. The narrator wants to rid his life of the vulture eye.

On the night of the murder, the old man is awakened by the opening of his door, and the murderous narrator “ chuckled at heart” upon hearing the man’s “ groan of mortal terror” (355). This silent laughter at the man’s fear demonstrates the potential psychopathy of the narrator. As the narrator allows a sliver of light to rest upon the vulture eye, he is immediately put into a frenzy, further demonstrating his madness. The murderer is “ helpless about his anxieties and his temperament. He cannot help not getting angry from trivial things” (Madi) such as the man’s eye. This anger allows the narrator to gruesomely murder the old man and dismember the corpse. In his recollection, he feels pride rather than guilt or pain. In retrospect, “ his thoughts of the grisly murder he committed are not accompanied by the feelings of disgust that mental healthy people would feel” (Zimmerman 40). His sanity continues to disintegrate as he believes that he can hear the dead

man's heartbeat, a trait that is a "real indicator of his complicated psychology" (Madi).

In addition to plot developments showing the growing insanity of the narrator as his mind consumes him, Poe uses "grammatical and linguistic choices" to prove "the madness and the instability of the main character of the story" (Madi). At the beginning, Poe uses a coherent and structured style of writing, to show the narrator's serenity and sanity. The narrator appears to be telling a story to an unknown audience, a technique used often by Poe. In the cases of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat", for example, "the mentally disturbed murders want to convince their auditors of the reasonableness of their crimes" (Zimmerman 33). His diction is like that of an "orator... or like a defence attorney advocating a point of view" (34) as he uses interjections to add emotion and compel the reader forward, but not block potential meaning. The admission of the opening episode demonstrates this, as the narrator states "True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous" He is able to directly address his audience as a competent storyteller, an ability that disintegrates with his sanity. The narrator speaks directly to his audience many times - "I can tell you the whole story", "you fancy me mad", "you would have laughed!" (Poe 354). Poe's narrator speaks directly to the audience to implore his listeners to believe his claim to sanity. His competence as a storyteller, however, disintegrates with the disintegration of his sanity.

As the plot advances, the choice of words and use of punctuation changes. Poe uses shorter sentences and more frequent interjections and punctuation

to create a faster pace within the story as well as to mimic the beating of the old man's heart. By changing the pace of the story to an upbeat tempo, he loses the composed peace he has maintained since the beginning and "his forensic powers have degenerated into complete and utter frenzy" (Zimmerman 36). Poe creates choppy sentences to mirror the increasing pace of the tale as the sound of the heartbeat grows louder. The narrator "talked more quickly - more vehemently". The narrator's growing paranoia - "they suspected! - they knew! - they were making a mockery of my horror!" - is matched by the heightened pace of the narrative. Just before confessing, the narrator hears the heart beating "again! - hark! louder! louder! louder! louder! -" (Poe 357). This tempo increase and choppiness demonstrates the growing insanity of the narrator.

Poe's understanding and demonstration of insanity appears in other short stories, including "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado", and many follow similar patterns as "The Tell-Tale Heart." In addition to insanity demonstrated by actions, Poe uses words and punctuation to show the inner minds of his characters. Is Poe able to master the technique of using language to show emotions, as his narrators can show "how calmly [they] can tell you the whole story" (354)?