

Literary criticism of
edgar poe's the tell-
tale heart from a
psychological
approa...



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The Tell-Tale Heart is one of the most famous works by Edgar Poe. The outstanding character in the tale, who is also the narrator, attracts a lot of attention from the readers. The character reveals much about human nature and other self qualities that people tend to overlook.

Themes of death, egoism, and evil are found in most of Poe's works. The same case applies to The Tell-Tale Heart as evidenced by the analysis in this paper. The analysis focuses on the main character and narrator of The Tell-Tale Heart. The analysis is conducted from a psychological approach.

There are various forms of literary psychological criticism. In this paper, the author uses the Freudian psychological approach to analyse Poe's work. The narrator forms the basis of the tale. All the themes in the story revolve around them.

The literary critique explores the themes of death, ego, and evil as reflected in Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart. The themes of ego and evil are featured prominently in this critical review.

The two contribute immensely to the narrator's actions. The literary criticism of the tale seeks to answer the question of human ego-evil relationship and associated psychological justifications. Freud's psychological approach serves in analysing the narrator's actions towards the old man.

Edgar Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart tale adopts the first person perspective. The main character also assumes the role of the narrator. He begins the story by arguing that they are sane and not mad as people are saying.

The narrator says, “ True!- nervous -very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses- not destroyed -not dulled them” (Poe par. 1). However, Poe does not tell the reader whether the narrator is a male or a female. The usage of the connotation ‘ He’ does not describe definite gender of the narrator, but just as an assumption.

The narrator admits that they are sick. However, they insist that the disease has sharpened their senses. The disease has not made them mad. In a bid to prove their sanity to the audience, the narrator embarks on the story. The events told in the story take place in a house where the narrator lives with an old man as a companion. The narrator claims that they loved the old companion very much.

As such, they did not have any reason or desire to kill him, not even for his money. The narrator reveals that they loved the old man. They were in good terms with the old man, and the narrator was not interested in stealing from him (Poe par. 2).

However, it appears that the old man had a deformed eye that instigated the narrator to commit the murder. In fact, if it were not for the eye, the story would have been very different. It follows then that the narrator has a motive to kill the old man.

Consequently, they scheme on how to execute the heinous crime. For seven consecutive nights, they stalked the companion throughout. They went to the extent of intensifying their affection for him to keep him close. On the

eighth night, an opportunity presented itself and the narrator killed the old man.

The act of murder execution proceeds with extreme caution and the body concealment. However, a last minute shriek by the old man, or probably the excited yell of the narrator, changed the events. The arrival of police officers to the scene immediately after the crime attests to this.

The police arrived to a warm welcome from the narrator. Their arrival, they attribute to a scream they had been alerted to having emanated from the house. The police search the entire building but find nothing. Eventually, the narrator invited the two police officers into the deceased old man's bedroom for a chat.

While there, however, the narrator imagined hearing the old man's heartbeat. The heartbeat got louder and louder as the narrator and the two police officers chatted away in the bedroom. Finally, the imaginary noise freaked the narrator out. Eventually admits to having killed the old man, and in proof of his crime shows the police officers where he hid the dismembered body.

Poe adopts a very interesting approach in writing the story. The main character, who also performs the heinous murderous act, tells the story. As a result, we assume the story is a confession. The confession is evident given that even the narrator insists they can prove their sanity to the audience.

The location of the story remains unclear. However, an analysis of the story creates the impression that the location is a courtroom. Such an assumption

looks fair given that the court could have declared the narrator to be of unsound mind. The story ends with the narrator revealing to the police officers where he hid the body. As such, it is likely that they are making the confession while under arrest.

Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* story is riddled with a number of themes. The numbers of themes vary depending on the analytical approach chosen to review the story. As already indicated, the current analysis relies on the psychological approach of literary critique. Hence, from the perspective of this approach, it appears that several themes are apparent in the story.

The main themes in the story include ego, murder, evil, obsession, insanity, and guilt. Others include reality viewpoints, justification, time, and cleverness. The themes of evil, ego, murder and insanity are very dominant in the story.

From the start of the story, the narrator insists on being sane. Consequently, the narrator details their heinous crime to prove their sanity. Even after the detailed narration, the narrator still insists on their sanity. They insist that they took a lot of precautions to cover their tracks, something that can only be done by a sane man (Poe par. 8).

In a number of instances, the narrator reminds the audience how cleverly they executed the murder. The assertion is evident when they claim, " You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. 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!" (Poe par. 3).

Despite the frantic effort to convince his sanity, the narrator falls under Freud's psychic zone of id. The id zone has a number of distinct characteristics. It is characterised by an excitement that is disorganized and lacks will. It is an impulsive drive that is aimed at satisfying the instincts and pleasures of the individual (Freud 103).

About the theme of murder, the narrator's motive is amusing, if not ridiculous. The 'admitted motive' is evident when the narrator says that the old man had the eye of a vulture. They describe it as "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" (Poe par. 2).

The execution of the heinous crime is almost perfect. The narrator leaves no trace behind. However, their confession raises doubts about their sanity. It is clear that the narrator is a ruthless murderer, considering how they killed and dismembered the old man's body for concealment.

The theme of obsession, and in some part that of guilt, is apparent from the beginning of the story. The desire to murder the old man increases whenever the narrator sees his deformed eye. It appears the narrator is obsessed with the deformed eye. The obsession to murder the old man based on his bad eye intensifies when the narrator sees him in bed.

The narrator does not exhibit obvious psychological motives. However, killing the old man based on the feelings the eye stirs in them is an indication of a possible motive. Indeed, motives for individual actions arise from thoughts,

feelings, and fantasies. The narrator fantasises killing the old man, revealing this aspect of human thinking in the process.

Such an obsession and the narrator's erratic behaviour, together with how they narrate the story, leave no doubt that they are insane. In fact, the narrator believes that the heartbeat of the dead old man nearly drove them insane to the extent of confessing to the crime. They describe how they shrieked and showed the police where they had hidden the body (Poe par. 10).

The story has six major characters. They include narrator, the old man (who ends up as the victim), the neighbour, and the three police officers. However, the story revolves more around the narrator and the old man than it does around the other characters.

In fact, one can argue that the narrator and the old man are the main characters. The other four are just supporting characters. Poe is not clear on the identity of the narrator's audience. It is not clear whom the narrator is trying to convince with the confession.

Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* revolves a lot around human nature. Human nature is made evident from the narrator's viewpoint. The narrator is very confident in the execution of the heinous crime. They are confident enough to confess about the same. The desire to prove their sanity is even more intriguing. As a result, the narrator creates a picture of self-worthiness, self-conviction, and lack of remorse.

The narration turns out to be a perfect rhetoric in relation to the narrator. From the beginning to the end of the story, the narrator makes the reader view their deeds with contempt a number of times. Perhaps, as Zimmerman puts it, *The Tell-Tale Heart* is in real sense a form of courtroom rhetoric-judicial. It is a form of forensic oratory (Zimmerman *Frantic Forensic Oratory* 34).

The narrator appears determined to convince someone with his or her confession. The determination is evident when they insist that mad men know nothing (Poe par. 3). The narrator's reference to "you" clearly shows that they are addressing someone else.

Perhaps the narrator is writing to or conversing with this 'you'. The narrator tries to persuade and guide the audience to their point of view. Essentially, it is clear that the narrator has already confessed to the crime. They have already shown the police the body before their confession (Poe par. 10).

The narrator is defending themselves in the story. They do not regard the heinous act with any remorse or contempt. From this analysis, one can argue that the story reveals one major aspect of human nature that is inherent to many individuals. Generally, many people tend to overlook their individual flaws and faults. They may do everything in their power to cover up these flaws and faults (Bonaparte 32).

Ki points out the theme of "ego-evil", which underlies the 'main' human nature highlighted in the narration (25). By definition, ego-evil refers to human behaviour that is, according to Žižek (70), driven by the desire for selfish gains and greed.

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Such behaviour is very apparent concerning the conduct of the narrator.

When one disregards the sanity of the narrator, which they seem to assert loudly, a sensible motive for their action is lost. In the words of the narrator, the old man had not done anything to anger them, “ I loved the old man. He had never wronged me” (Poe par. 2).

From the discourse above, it is apparent that associating the narrator with ego-evil behaviour is logical. In essence, the narrator's actions are motivated by some form of ideological ideal. The actions also emanate from their fanatical devotion (Ki 25).

The narrator's egocentrism is apparent in their ‘ over-identification’ with the views they hold. Such a trait on the part of the narrator ultimately leads to a form of “ narcissistic ‘ denigradation’ of others and violation of human laws” (Zizek 70).

The narrator claims killing the old man due to his bad eye. In essence, the narrator admits the old man's vulture eye is what made them commit the offense (Poe par. 2). Such an explanation tells a lot about the narrator's state of mind. Regarding the old man's eye as identical to that of a vulture gives the narrator the motivation they need to commit the crime.

With such an attitude, they could easily kill the man without any remorse. As such, the narrator judged the old man based on personal affections, rather than on truth. Ki (25) explains this behaviour from a psychological perspective.

According to Ki (25), an intentional misjudgement of another person is an indication of the shortcomings of the self. It means that the self lacks insight (Ki 25). Killing the old man would rid the narrator the 'torturing' eye. Such an explanation appears valid from a psychological perspective.

The narrator is a true representation of 'self-misrepresentation'. Their character also shows the narrator has 'misdirected' sense of self-worth and self-righteousness. Both of these aspects are blown out of proportion concerning the narrator. From the onset of the narrative, the persona appears determined to point out their strengths, which are in doubt.

In their narration, the persona says that the disease has only made their senses sharper. They claim to have heard things from heaven and from earth. According to them, this is proof enough that they are sane and not mad (Poe par. 1).

The narrator's sense of self is terrible, especially with regards to their senses. Such a convoluted sense of self leads to another conclusion. The conclusion is that the narrator is psychotic. The psychotic nature of the narrator is the first impression created in the mind of the reader at the beginning of the narrative. However, the narrator endeavours to prove otherwise in the narrative.

Further analysis of the narration reveals that the persona is a 'self-positing' individual. They try to create the impression of an individual who is very right. They claim that they discovered their powers on that night. They were so happy when they discovered how intelligent they are (Poe par. 4). Such a

' perception of self' means that the narrator likes to exercise their powers on others.

Perceptions of own power, triumph, and sagacity also portray the narrator as a person who likes to dominate the helpless. The old man was asleep and half-blind due to the darkness and his bad eye, yet the narrator was triumphant of killing him. Pitcher (232) portrays the narrator in Poe's tale as someone living in a universe where the self is the only god that exists.

Eventually, it is apparent that the narrator fails miserably to convince the audience of their sanity or self-importance. According to Melville (34), the narrator appears to fully understand the various techniques of argument. They are trying desperately to convince the audience.

Initially, the narrator indicates that they are aware of what the audience thinks of them. The narrator is aware that the audience considers them as a hostile, nervous, and lunatic person. Because of this awareness, the narrator attempts to win over the good will of whoever is listening to them.

The narrator lodges an appeal to the audience's sense of reason to mitigate the hostility directed towards them. Such an appeal is also aimed at making the audience more receptive. The narrator tells the audience that they wish they were there when they were committing the offense. The audience, according to the narrator, would have seen for themselves how efficient and wise they (the narrator) are (Poe par. 3).

The narrator strategically makes use of concession as a means of ethical appeal. They try to impress the audience by proving that they can make

frank confessions. They create the impression that they are a good person with a strong and confident streak. They try to prove that they can confidently concede and nullify opposing points of view.

The nature of Poe's character in the story can be summed up from John Claggart's psychoanalysis perspective (as cited in Melville). Thus, " the narrator's even temper and discerning bearing would seem to point to an individual peculiarly exposed to the law of reason" (Melville 76). The narrator has little or nothing to do with reason.

They only employ it as an ' ambidexterity' means of irrational affections. Such evaluation implies that the narrator is engaging in wanton atrocities that appear to be the reserve of the insane. They are engaging in such acts based on very ' direct' and ' cool' judgement. As such, one can conclude that the narrator is a mad man and very dangerous.

According to Zimmerman (Moral Insanity or Paranoid Schizophrenia? 42), Poe effectively maintains an objective distance in telling the story and watches as the reader tackles the etiological irony that follows. Poe uses rhetoric consciously and deliberately in most of his homicidal tales.

He also engages in irony in most of his arguments. Most of Poe's characters try to justify their actions using ' reasonable' excuses that are not so ' reasonable'. Such an approach is apparent in The Tell-Tale Heart story.

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