

The tell-tale heart and the cask of amontillado



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Both 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Cask of Amontillado' reveal a psychotic narrator unravelling a macabre tale of irrational fear or revenge. But how does Poe so convincingly evoke the distorted mind of such a character? One way that Poe achieves this is that both stories employ the first person narrator - a technique which allows the reader a privileged view inside the character's mind. In TTH, the unnamed narrator and in TCoA, it is Montresor.

Everything that is told to us has to pass through the narrator's perception and this allows us to judge his trustworthiness, his biased viewpoint, his state of mind. In both stories, the protagonist in both stories reveals immediately, in fact in the very first line of the story, that they both victims to mania. The protagonist of TTH is clearly mad. His first utterance with the exclamation, staccato phrasing, pauses, repetitions gives the effect of a highly agitated mind who immediately asks us to concord with him that he is completely sane: "True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been, and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" The question only serves to confirm in our minds that he is insane. In TCoA, the narrator, Montresor, the hyperbole: "the thousand injuries" and his intent on vengeance merely because of an insult suggests megalomania. Both stories employ a disjointed narrative style that allows Poe to reveal the abnormal psychological state of his protagonists.

In 'The Cask of Amontillado', the dashes as in "I hesitated - I trembled" and "I re-echoed - I aided - I surpassed" indicate that Montresor is not thinking coherently. Similarly, in 'The Tell-Tale Heart', "They heard! - They suspected! - They knew!" reveal the rantings and ravings of a madman.

Moreover, what makes the tale distinctly unnerving to the reader is the way

that the narrator addresses us, the readers. He adopts an informal, confiding, conspiratorial tone as if he is talking to a friend, making us feel like accomplices to the crime.

In 'The Tell-Tale Heart', the narrator imagines we would have been amused and entertained by the way he so slowly and patiently eased his head through the door of the old man's chamber: "Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in!". Similarly, Montresor claims familiarity with us: "You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat." Furthermore, the protagonist of TTH is delusional. He hears voices. He admits himself that he is suffering from a disease, although he never clarifies what this disease is to himself, but thinks that this disease has sharpened his senses so that he has extraordinary ability to hear what others cannot hear.

His reasoning is flawed. But only by the next line does the reader realise how disturbed this individual is for he hears "all things in heaven and hell". The fact that he reiterates the fact that he hears many things in hell suggests that his mind is preoccupied with diabolical notions. Edgar Allan Poe employs the sounds that he hears to emphasise the disturbed state of mind of his protagonist.

The faint beating of the old man's heart, is compared to "dull, loud, quick sound - much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton". This sound becomes increasingly louder as the protagonist becomes more exasperated by the vulture eye that it builds up to a crescendo that highlights the chaotic tumultuous torment inside the protagonist's mind.

Moreover, Poe also skilfully employs the same image to build up the tension as the protagonist hears it again as the police officers talk to him and the overpowering sense of guilt that leads the protagonist to confess his crime. The protagonist in TCoA entertains ideas of grandeur and paranoia: he is intensely egotistical and regards himself superior to everyone but also harbours irrational suspicion of other people and their motives. He regards himself as eminently superior : he generalises about the Italians that “ few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit” and that by and large they just dupe American and Austrian millionaires and derides all Italians in their ability to discern good quality painting and jewellery.

This suggests that he is xenophobic. The evidence that he is irrationally suspicious of Fortunato is when he states that he “ accosted” him with “ excessive warmth”. Accosted carries connotations of aggression ; hence is an oxymoron. The only fault that lies in Fortunato appears to be his pride in discerning wines; hardly a justification for murder. Apart from this, he appears to be jovial, joining in with the carnival and sociable : unlike the solitary and resentful Montresor. What makes the murders extremely horrifying is this lack of any justifiable motive.

TTH the narrator clearly states: “ Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult.

For his gold, I had no desire. I think it was his eye”. Even when he does fall upon a justification for the murder, it is only a supposition, and certainly not strong enough to merit murder. This demonstrates that the protagonist’s

psychological obsession with the old man's eye outweighs his emotional attachment to him and thus confirms his mental instability.

Similarly, in the case of TCoA, the narrator's egotism and pride will not suffer insult and he believes that the audacity of Fortunato in insulting him justifies his murder. In both cases, the values of the protagonists' minds are so distorted that they can justify murder on the most irrational and feeble reasons. Both narrators ironically have rationally and logically planned out the murders. TTH: the narrator spends 7 whole nights painstakingly and with intense caution inching his head around the door of the old man's bedroom to get a glimpse of the vulture eye.

However, this is further evidence of his abnormal psychological state because he reveals an obsessiveness about his strategy. He watches the old man every night at twelve precisely. Similarly, Montresor has planned the execution of his deed: "at length, I would be avenged" and by the time the guileless Fortunato arrives in the catacombs, Montresor has the iron fetters, trowel, and entombment all set up. Moreover, he has planned it so deftly that he will avoid all suspicion: "for the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them".

These are no spontaneous crimes of passion but meticulously planned and gruesome murders. As opposed to the raving ramblings of a maniac, we hear the pride of the narrator in the planning and execution of the murder. "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded - with what caution - with what foresight - with what dissimulation I went to work". The horror which the

reader experiences stems from the way that the narrator can so casually and unemotionally portray these horrific killings.

What is interesting in TTH is how the narrator can distance himself from the actual deed. The narrator in TTH claims that it is not the old man that he wishes to kill ; instead, he merely wishes to close forever the Evil eye: "" For it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. " Such disassociation from the evil deed that he intends to perpetrate on this innocent old man shows his lack of any emotional involvement with the deed: he does not see that closing the eye forever inevitably involves causing harm to the old man. He rationalises to himself that he is merely ridding himself of the eye and the old man is incidental to this. All these symptoms experienced by the protagonist-the emotional instability, the delusions, the detachment from reality all point to schizophrenia. Furthermore, both narrators deliberately adopt strategies which will not betray their real intentions towards their victims.

Their hypocritical smiles and warmth towards their intended victims , when in their hearts they are plotting to murder them , make the scenario acutely unnerving to read. In TTH, the narrator " was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him". Similarly, in TCoA, the narrator " continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation. " Further evidence of these protagonists' abnormal psychological states is evident in the glee which they experience from the painful agonies of their victims. In TTH, as the old man groans in mortal terror, the narrator " chuckled at heart"

and later when he has killed the old man, he “ smiled gaily to find the deed so far done.

“. To find mirth and amusement in death and murder appals the reader and is indisputable evidence of the disturbed psychological state of the protagonist. Similarly, when Fortunato struggles vehemently to be rid of the iron chains that fetter him to the enclosed niche, Montresor stops in his work so that he might “ hearken to it with the more satisfaction”. Such an abnormal pleasure is gained by the narrators in hearing their victims suffer suggest that they are both sadists. This is further exemplified in their need to have helpless victims who are defenceless and incapable of defending themselves.

The narrator in TTH awaits until his victim is in bed, particularly vulnerable in the darkness and at rest. In TCoA, Fortunato is intoxicated and Montresor supplies him with further drink so that he is totally incapacitated so that he has to lean on Fortunato to walk through the vault. Moreover, the protagonist In TTH feels a surge of euphoria and power from having such vulnerable victims: the narrator in TTH speaks of his “ feelings of triumph” and have never feeling “ the extent of his powers - of my sagacity” as he watches the prostrate figure of the old man, who would “ not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. Evidently, both protagonists feel supremely confident that they will escape suspicion. Montresor insists upon it: “ I must not only punish, but punish with impunity.

” He hints to Fortunato and the reader what he intends to do: he pours some “ De Grave” for Fortunato. De grave means “ of the grave. ” He describes his family crest as “ a huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushed a

serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel". This could be interpreted as meaning that Montresor feels Fortunato's presence as crushing, oppressive, overwhelming, but that Montresor knows that Fortunato's Achilles heel is his excessive pride in his knowledge about wine and that like the snake, Montresor will imbed his fangs into his victim and kill him. Alternatively, Fortunato might represent the snake biting at the heel of the giant, who Montresor sees as himself.

Montresor need only to put his foot onto to the ground to crush the snake that troubles him. The protagonist in 'The Tell-Tale Heart' similarly reveals a preternatural security from detection: "I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim. Poe incorporates Gothic elements into both stories and provides a fitting backdrop for the exploration of abnormal psychological states. The setting in 'The Cask of Amontillado', in particular, shows this with its subterranean passages, "a long and winding staircase", "the damp ground of the catacombs", "piled bones", "inmost recesses of the catacombs" "deep crypt", glowing flambeaux. In Gothic literature, interiors are always dangerous places. Thus, in 'The Cask of Amontillado' the subterranean passages lead to death.

In 'The Tell-Tale Heart', danger dwells inside the house; not outside as the old man assumes with his close-fastened shutters against robbers. The preoccupation with being buried alive is also a characteristic gothic theme and Poe himself was obsessively preoccupied with fear of premature burial. Fortunato in 'The Cask of Amontillado' is walled up into a "still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven", the <https://assignbuster.com/the-tell-tale-heart-and-the-cask-of-amontillado/>

dimensions for a coffin. This gothic characteristic is also present in 'The Tell-Tale Heart', although this time not more subtly. Although technically the old man is dead, "stone dead" in fact when he is buried, nevertheless, the old man's heart continues to beat: "a low, dull, quick sound". In this way, Poe shows that for the narrator at least, the old man has been prematurely buried.

The protagonists of both stories also are social outcasts in their society. Poe demonstrates this clearly by the description of Montresor's attire at the carnival: whilst Fortunato is dressed in gawdy carnival clothes-"The man wore motley. He had on a tight fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells", Montresor is dressed in black: ""a mask of black silk". This serves to physically isolate him from the multicoloured throng around him; it also represents his role as executioner of Montresor.

Also, in the gothic tradition, Poe shows these protagonists' instinctive needs and desires are fulfilled at a cost: guilt. The protagonist of 'The Tell-Tale Heart' feels compelled to confess his murderous deed; Montresor, fifty years later, feels impelled to confide what happened. Through all these strategies Poe allows the reader a startling revelation into the minds of a psychotic. So powerful and convincing are the portrayals of these states of mind, one cannot help but wonder how he had such an intuitive grasp of this subject. The answer lies in his own life.

He himself was subject to delusions and depression, probably brought about by bouts of alcoholism. He would disappear for days on end, taking

laudanum, drink but then return to resume his writing with passion. It might be that his experiences during these days provided with the material to delve deeply into the human psyche. In conclusion, both in his own life and in his literature, Poe had a predisposition and fascination with abnormal psychological states. In these two stories, his decision to portray his protagonists as criminals allowed them to revel to the extremes of such behaviour and pushed them even beyond this so that both emerge with a sense of guilt and inability to deal with their psychosis. Therefore, the reader is presented with a thorough and thought-provoking exploration of the minds of abnormal psychological states