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“You Fancy Me Mad”

A Point of View Analysis of *The Tell-Tale Heart*

Edgar Allan Poe’s short story entitled *The Tell-Tale Heart* was published in 1843. The story follows an unnamed protagonist who attempts to convince an unidentified interlocutor of his sanity. To put it differently, throughout an uninterrupted monologue, the narrator presents to his addressee a “sanity defence”. The objective of the present paper is to demonstrate that Edgar Allan Poe’s unnamed character, in fact, suffers from moral insanity. This will be achieved by providing a stylistic analysis focusing on the manner in which Poe represents his protagonist’s speech as well as the conveyance of his point of view. Indeed, although he is endeavouring to persuade his interlocutor otherwise, the narrator demonstrates his madness through his speech. It is rather difficult for the narratee (and by extension, the reader) to ignore the irony.

Poe’s narrator’s mental illness has been brought to the fore by numerous scholars who argue that *The Tell-Tale Heart* portrays a character who suffers from a psychological disorder. For instance, both Arthur E. Robinson and Hollie Pritchard conclude that the narrator’s agitated denial of insanity leads the reader to suspect that he is not in his right mind (369; 144). They are joined by Paige Matthey Bynum, who makes a similar claim in her article “‘Observe How Healthily—How Calmly I Can Tell You the Whole Story’: Moral Insanity and Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” (143), as well as Dan Shen in his work entitled “Edgar Allan Poe’s Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” (342).

Moreover, Brett Zimmerman argues that the culprit is a schizophrenic (“‘Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia: Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” 40).

In order to argue that Poe’s narrator suffers from mental instability, the entirety of the short story will be analysed by using Paul Simpson’s framework for point of view, which he outlines in his *Language, Ideology and Point of View*. Firstly, a brief summary of the short story will be provided, before delving into the analysis, utilising various passages to support the statements this paper will make. Finally, the aforementioned literature will be addressed. Such an analysis will allow for the present paper to conclude that the way the killer uses language to defend himself and his sanity does not have the intended effect, and in fact accounts for his plausible mental derangement.

Beginning in medias res, *The Tell-Tale Heart*’s first-person narrator relates how he spent days planning the murder of his elderly housemate, how he killed and dismembered him, and finally, how he hid the limbs of the body under the planks of his victim’s bedroom floor. The protagonist discloses the rationale behind the murder of the old man, revealing that he could not bear the sight of his “vulture eye”. For a week, he would enter the man’s room during his slumber and watch him sleep, intending to execute him. Nevertheless, he could never bring himself to do so, for the sole reason that he could not catch a glimpse of the old man’s “Evil Eye”, as he was always asleep.

On the eighth night however, the man woke up hearing the narrator enter his chambers, his dreadful, pale blue eye illuminated by a single ray of light. When the crime had been committed and the body parts hidden under the parquet, three policemen came to search the house. They had received a call from a worried neighbour. The narrator and the officers were having a pleasant conversation when the former suddenly started to hear the dead man’s beating heart, pounding

louder and louder. Convinced that the policemen could hear it too, the killer interpreted their smiles and pleasant chat as hypocritical, dissembling the fact that they noticed the increasingly loud heartbeat as well. In a state of frenzy, the narrator confessed to the murder, tearing up the planks, revealing the corpse.

Poe's story can be labelled as a monologue because speech indicators can easily be identified within the text. The most compelling evidence for this would be the fact that the protagonist refers to his interlocutor as "you", thus evidently addressing a second party. Although the receiver of the information, the addressee, is never explicitly identified nor revealed, the reader can assume that the narrator is chronicling his story to a cellmate, a lawyer, a policeman, a jury, or another person he would be susceptible to have to defend himself to. Indeed, his monologue suggests that he already confessed to the murder, and is most likely to have been incarcerated, or awaiting his pending sentence.

Paul Simpson identifies different types of modality in the English language, which is central to the framework that he outlines. For clarity, "modality" refers to a speaker's "attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition expressed by a sentence" (43). According to Simpson, there are four modal systems in English. Firstly, the *deontic system*, the modal system of duty, which is concerned with the speaker's attitude towards the degree of obligation related to a specific action. For instance, the difference between the sentences "you may leave", "you should leave" and "you must leave", where the deontic modal auxiliaries form a continuum of commitment (43).

Secondly, the *boulomaic system*, which encompasses the grammaticised expressions of desire. For example, "I hope you stay, "I wish you could stay" or "I regret that you have to leave" include modal lexical verbs that indicate the desires of the speaker (44).

Thirdly, Simpson identifies the *epistemic system*, which is arguably the most important one for the analysis of point of view in fiction, and accordingly the most relevant one in the present paper. The *epistemic system* is “concerned with the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition expressed” (44). Modal auxiliaries can convey different degrees of *epistemic commitment* to the truth of a proposition (44). A *categorical assertion* refers to the strongest degree of commitment: “you are right”. This degree of commitment can be lessened by rephrasing the latter sentence as “you could be right”, “I suppose you are right”, or “you are probably right” (45).

Finally, the *perception system* is a subcategory of the epistemic system, “distinguished by the fact that the degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition is predicated on some reference to human perception” (46). This can be illustrated by the categorical assertion “Mary has gone”, which becomes “it is apparent that Mary has gone” or “clearly, Mary has gone” once a reference to visual perception is introduced.

In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Edgar Allan Poe combines what Simpson refers to as a *category A* narrator with both a positively and negatively shaded narrative. Simpson’s model for psychological point of view describes the category A narrator as one that expresses him or herself in the first person and is a participating character in the narrative (50). He contrasts this type of storyteller with the *category B* narrator, a non-participating, “disembodied” third person speaker (51).

With regard to the shading of the narrative, Simpson identifies three different types: positive, negative and neutral. A positively shaded narrative contains numerous modal verbs, adjectives, and adverbs belonging to the deontic and boulomaic systems (56). In other words, a text that is predominantly positively shaded includes modalities that point towards the speaker’s duties, desires, judgements and obligations regarding the narrated events or characters (56). On the other

hand, a negatively shaded narrative is related to both the epistemic and perception systems, which highlight the narrator's bewilderment or uncertainty (58). Finally, a narrative that is neutrally shaded contains no subjective evaluations, as the narrator resorts to categorical assertions (60).

Although positive shading initially appears to be dominant in Poe's short story, the text in its entirety seems to abruptly transition from positive to negative shading on various occasions, contributing to the overall disorienting quality of the text. Additionally, with regard to neutral shading, *The Tell-Tale Heart* does not make use of a journalistic style. Neutral shading would depict an unreflective character, and Poe's narrator is everything but.

As mentioned above, *The Tell-Tale Heart*'s protagonist corresponds to Simpson's *category A* narrator. The story is narrated in retrospect by a character who, from the very first line, consistently uses the first-person pronoun *I* and refers to events he experienced first-hand. Furthermore, the narrator's speech conveys a lack of confidence and uneasiness, as well as a feeling of great disturbance, confusion and turmoil regarding the murder of the old man. Such sentiments, expressed linguistically, are indicative of a negatively shaded text. When a "positive statement" is put forth, pointing to the narrator's sanity, it is immediately discredited by a negatively shaded excerpt. The reader thus comes to doubt the validity of what the narrator is arguing and—indirectly—his mental state, as his arguments lose the palpability and tangibility they possessed before the introduction of negative shading. This is exemplified in the following passages.

Passage 1

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. 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.

(Poe 92)

In this opening paragraph, the use of the evaluative adverbs “dreadfully”, “healthily” and “calmly” demonstrates the narrator’s own judgement over the propositional content, thus pointing to positive shading (Simpson 56). The paragraph which directly follows this passage is negatively shaded, for it conveys the killer’s confusion concerning the reason behind the murder of his housemate. He conjectures that he killed him because of his frightening eye.

Passage 2

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. 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 for ever.

(Poe 92)

The modal verb “think” stresses the narrator’s own knowledge, or in this particular case, his lack of knowledge regarding whether or not the eye caused him to murder the old man. Moreover, the narrator compares the eye to that of a vulture. In accordance with Simpson’s framework, comparative structures are characteristic of negative shading because they find their basis in human perception (58). The fact that the epistemic markers are pre-posed allows for the reader to directly identify the propositional content as uncertain. Be that as it may, the narrative does suddenly become positively shaded in the next paragraph.

Passage 3

Now this is the point. 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 92)

“Madmen know nothing” is a generic sentence, which Simpson defines as possessing universal or timeless reference, an indicator of positive shading (57). Moreover, by repeating to his addressee “you should have seen”, the narrator expresses that he wishes that his interlocutor would have witnessed his deeds. As previously mentioned, positive shading can be indicated by the presence

of boulomaic modality. Lastly, the evaluative adverb “wisely” points to a positively shaded excerpt as well, as it expresses the narrator’s judgement.

It is triumphantly and proudly that he explains that he was able to enter the man’s room without being noticed, which later on gave him to opportunity to violently kill him. Poe’s narrator appears to be completely detached from the atrocity of his actions as he resorts to reasoning to justify an unreasonable act. Indeed, the abrupt employ of positive shading after showing the narrator’s uncertainty regarding his motive can be interpreted as Poe’s way to emphasise that his narrator is not too concerned with the fact that he killed someone, but much more with proving his mental stability.

In the following passage, the narrator affirms that he was conscious of how the old man felt. Poe uses the modal lexical verb “to know” multiple times, with a positive polarity. Furthermore, language denoting what one feels is characterised by Simpson as *verba sentiendi*, which is characteristic of a positively shaded text (57).

Passage 4

Presently I heard a slight groan, and *I knew* it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. *I knew* the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say *I knew* it well. *I knew* what the old man *felt*, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. *I knew* that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed.

(Poe 93)

Passage 5

(...)it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to *feel* the presence of my head within the room.

(Poe 94)

Even though not all passages are in perfect accordance with Simpson's framework, the text in its entirety is negatively shaded. This is evident from the way the narrator's certainty and commitment to the propositional content of his sentences is consistently overthrown by the frantic way he expresses himself. Although the protagonist clearly states that he is not insane, his use of language indicates otherwise. This is conveyed through Poe's use of repetitions and interruptions in the narrator's speech: "*nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous*", "and observe *how healthily—how calmly* I can tell you the whole story." The narrator claims that he can relate his tale calmly, but is already speaking hastily, driven by his will to convince his interlocutor. In addition, as put forward by Zimmerman, in such a context, "calmly" cannot be equalled to "healthily" (76). Indeed, a calm recounting of such events (the murder and subsequent dismembering) only underline the narrator's sheer madness. Such repetitions occur throughout the monologue, as exemplified in the following passage.

Passage 6

And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all *closed, closed*, so that no light shone out, and then *I thrust in my head*. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly *I thrust it in!* I moved it *slowly—very, very slowly*, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. (...) *And then*, when my head was well in the room, *I undid* the lantern *cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously* (for the hinges creaked)—*I undid* it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye.

(Poe 92)

Finally, the pace of the speech seems to accelerate as the narrator recounts the events leading to his confession. Not only is this effect made apparent through the aforementioned repetitions and interruptions, but it is also emphasised through the shortening of sentences towards the end of the text. Furthermore, the narrator's monologue ends with his recounting of the dead man's beating heart, pounding increasingly louder. His panicked tone, together with the questions

“what could I do?” and “Was it possible they heard not?”, supports an evaluation of the excerpt as negatively shaded.

The last paragraph foregrounds the narrator’s doubts and lack of knowledge. *The Tell-Tale Heart*’s ending thus confirms the protagonist’s madness.

Passage 13

Oh God! what could I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But any thing was better than this agony! Any thing was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!— hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!—

(Poe 96)

The very last paragraph is more foregrounded than any other. It is one of the two only instances of direct speech in the whole text, but most importantly, its division gives it prominence, together with its contents: a self-accusation, the projection of the narrator’s own dissemblance onto the policemen (Shen 336).

Passage 14

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!”

(Poe 96)

Multiple sources confirm the narrator’s mental derangement. Brett Zimmerman diagnoses him as a paranoid schizophrenic (“‘Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia” 40). In his article, he enumerates the symptoms of the disorder and identifies them in the short story. Such symptoms include argumentativeness, anxiety and lack of insight (“‘Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia” 40; American Psychiatric Association 287). The narrator is evidently anxious as

he relives the murder and his confession. Moreover, he rejects the proposition that he must be an anxiety-ridden madman as “erroneous, impertinent” and “absurdly false” (“Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia” 40).

In addition, the narrator possesses what Zimmerman characterizes as a “psychopathic inability to appreciate the morality of his deeds” (41). Although he is able to construct a powerful piece of argumentation, his thoughts about the atrocious murder that has been committed are not accompanied by feelings of disgust, guilt or fear. On the contrary, the narrator feels delighted and proud of himself. This split between feeling and thought is referred to by Zimmerman as a manifestation of schizophrenia (“Frantic Forensic Oratory” 45).

That is why he is able to turn perfidiously into wisely, sneakiness into caution, scheming into foresight, treacherously into cunningly, and to define dissimulation as ingenuity rather than hypocrisy. We recognize this rhetorical reevaluation of values as a sign of schizophrenia; the narrator does not.

(Zimmerman 45)

Pritchard supports this argument by stating that the actions performed by the narrator, combined with his fervent insistence on claiming that he is sane, engenders the reader to conclude that he does indeed suffer from a certain psychological disorder (144). Furthermore, Robinson claims that the protagonist’s tendency to repeat that he is not mad leads him into a pattern of reiterating the very same argument over and over again, resulting in the reader’s mistrust (369). This paper’s analysis agrees with these findings.

To conclude, because Edgar Allan Poe resorts to a first-person narrator, the reader is forced to see the crime being recollected and carried out through the point of view of the killer, through his own perspective, one that significantly increases the dramatic effect of the short story. Moreover, the reader has no exterior points of reference. They are presented with only what the

narrator “chooses” to show them. Therefore, Poe is successful in conveying his protagonist’s madness through his dramatically effective lyrical monologue. This has for effect to raise the reader’s expectation of what will come next. Such a result would have been lost if the story had been narrated by a category B narrator. Indeed, the crime would have been explicitly characterised as irrational from the start of the narrative. Although it is evident that the unidentified interlocutor is listening to the words of a madman, it is through the category A narrative that the reader is able to form their own opinion regarding the sanity of Poe’s protagonist. The abundance of modal markers and repetitions allows one to recognise the narrator’s nervousness, the gap between his actions and his thoughts, thus supporting the theory that he is indeed morally insane.

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