

A Narratological Analysis of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Edgar Alan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" from a narratological perspective, investigating the construction of meaning through the narrative pattern. Although, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" has been the focus of much literary criticism since its publication, that is, some researchers have focused on the morality aspect of the story, whilst others have focused on the psychological and stylistic analysis of the short story, yet a comprehensive scholarly research has not been carried out on its narratological aspects. This paper aims to fill this gap by putting the short story in the narratological framework and unfolding the narrative patterns through which meaning is constructed and effects created. This study takes Peter Barry's 'Joined-up' narratology (Story/Plot distinction, Aristotle's three key elements in the plot, Gérard Genette's steps of Narrative Discourse) as a theoretical framework and uses the textual analysis technique to interpret the narrative patterns in the story. The study is qualitative and utilizes the textual analysis technique to decode the meaning of the text and find narrative patterns, and argues that approaching "The Tell-Tale Heart" through these mainly technical narratological categories offer new paradigms that shows how meanings are constructed in narratives and how audience/readers are engaged in the narratives through these technicalities. The study draws the primary source material from Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" with secondary sources from research articles and books.

Keywords: Narratology, Joined-up Narratology, Story, Plot, Gérard Genette, Mimesis, Diegesis, frame narrative

INTRODUCTION

Narratology is a branch, an offshoot of structuralism that studies narrative structures. It examines how narratives generate meaning and what the basic underlying systems and procedures are that are shared across all forms of storytelling (Barry, 2009). Peter Barry asserts that narratology is not concerned with analyzing individual stories, but attempts to understand the essence of the 'story' itself, both as an idea and as a cultural practice (p. 215). Just like the Saussurean concept of langue and parole, narratology takes

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an individual work of literature (parole) and identifies the underlying narrative structures that are found beneath all narratives (langue). Thomas A. Schmitz in his book *Modern Literary Theory and Ancient Texts* (2008) opines that it is with narratology that the structuralist methodologies become valuable, and we are provided with a proper framework for the analysis of narratives (Schmitz, 2008, as cited in Barry, 2009,

So, what is a narratological analysis and what does it look like? A narratological analysis first starts with the fundamental distinction between 'story' and 'plot', but different people at different times had an array of thoughts about the art of narration. Aristotle, for example, in his *Poetics* came up with the idea of three basic components in a plot: the hamartia or the character's flaw, the anagnorisis, which is the moment of realization, and the peripeteia or the sudden change in circumstances. Vladimir Propp in *The Morphology of the Folktale* analyzed the 'corpus' of a hundred Russian folktales and came to the conclusion that those tales were produced by selecting items from a set of elemental components of thirty-one 'functions' (Barry, 2009, p. 218-19), and seven 'spheres of action' or roles (p. 221). Similarly, Gérard Genette in his work *Narrative Discourse* focused on the process of telling, that is, how the tale is told, rather than the tale itself (Barry, 2009, p. 222).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, and by using the textual analysis technique, it uses 'joined-up' narratology as a theoretical framework for analyzing Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". The primary source of the study is drawn from the original text of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Peter Barry's chapter on Narratology in his book *Beginning Theory*, whilst the secondary source is drawn from different articles and books relevant to the study.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher takes up Peter Barry's 'joined-up' narratology (discussed in his book *Beginning Theory*) as a basic narratological toolkit for analyzing Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". Barry's 'Joined-up' narratology consists of a distinction between story/plot, Aristotle's three important elements in the plot, that is, the *hamartia*, the *anagnorisis*, and the *peripeteia*; Gérard Genette's steps about storytelling; and Vladimir Propp's thirty-one functions (which is will not be part of this study).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brian Wall (2013) in his article *Narrative Purpose and Legal Logic in "The Tell-Tale Heart"* argues that previously, scholars have interpreted "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a study of legal rhetoric and the defense of insanity. He argues that rather than treating it as an attempt to mitigate the charge of murder, they have treated it as an argument against a charge of insanity. Wall contextualizes Poe's deep understanding of insanity and utilizes that understanding to investigate the identity of the narrator's audience ("you", the reader) and the significance of the question, "but why will you say that I am mad?"

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (2017) in her fascinating article *The Horror of Taking a Picture in Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart"* analyzes the story as a specimen of the daguerreotype. She opines that Edgar Allan Poe was familiar with the process of taking a daguerreotype back in the 1840s. This knowledge of daguerreotype, she argues, had largely influenced a number of his short stories including "The Tell-Tale Heart". This story elicits the images of setting up a camera, adjusting and disclosing lenses, and capturing the image. The story alludes to the process of taking a daguerreotype, as it is narrated from the perspective of a narrator who is fixated on using visual technology to capture a specific image.

In his research article, Jarkko Toikkanen (2017) carried out his study on the audio-visual images in "The Tell-Tale Heart". He explains how visual images are enmeshed with audio sounds and how audio sounds are supplemented by visual images, thus adding more to the meaning of the short story. Brett Zimmerman (2001), on the other hand, analyzes the 'Frantic Forensic Oratory' in "The Tell-Tale Heart". He traces back six classical devices of forensic oratory in the story which are used by the narrator as a legal defence. Those six devices are *exordium* (introduction), *praeparatio*, the *narratio* (statement of the case), *expeditio*, *aetiologia*, and *necessum*. According to Zimmerman, Poe's narrator creates a compelling yet pitiful scene, a "jarring collocation": blending insanity with a strong focus on logical reasoning (logos) rooted in classical rhetoric. Similarly, Wang Ni (2022) provides an in-depth analysis of the unreliable narration employed by Edgar Allan Poe in "The Tell-Tale Heart", arguing that such techniques enhance reader involvement and also prompt them to doubt the narrator's sanity and interpret symbols that show his inner conflict. The study also notices that there is scarcity of studies on unreliable narration on Poe's story, and focus is often given to its aesthetic and Gothic style.

R.D. Gooder (1987) in his article "Edgar Allan Poe: The Meaning of Style" argues that the fact Poe's tales solicit interpretation is not because of 'elements of psychological case history' but rather, it has to do with "art of a purer kind" than ingenuity (p. 121). These salient elements, moreover, are elements of style, and their effects upon the readers not only depend upon their moods but also their receptivity to the style employed by the author. Talking about the 'form', the 'style' of Poe's tales, Gooder reasons that the readers' concentration elicited forth by Poe, the assiduousness with which he shapes his material, and the clarity of his writing, make the readers appreciate Poe's craftsmanship without questioning the substance, the contents of his tales (Gooder, 1987, p. 123).

A review of the previous literature demonstrates that despite much focus on the 'form' and 'style' of "The Tell-Tale Heart", there is a need for microscopic narratological analysis of the tale which is the focus of this study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To begin with, the first step is story/plot distinction: the 'story' is simply the raw sequence of events, while the 'plot' is how those events as they are arranged and shared as a narrative. The story, moreover, *has to* begin at the beginning and then move chronologically. The 'plot' on the other hand, may well begin somewhere in the middle of

a series of events, and then may backtrack, thus giving us the 'flashback'. It may also give us clues about events to happen in the future, thus 'flashforward' (Barry 2009).

The story of "The Tell-Tale Heart" begins right in the second paragraph when the narrator narrates the story of him killing an old man with an eye that "resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it" (Poe, 2006, p. 187). Before narrating the story of how and why he killed the old man, the narrator gives arguments to prove his sanity. The fact that he could narrate the story 'calmly, is proof enough of his sanity (p. 187).. The plot is rather abrupt, that is, we do not know about the age and gender of the narrator. We do not have any idea about his birth and life. We are just told by the narrator that the 'disease'—which is unknown—has sharpened and not dulled his senses and that he heard "all things in the heaven and in the earth" (p. 187).

In the very first paragraph, Poe uses 'flash-forwarding', an important plot technique to indicate that the narrator's acuteness of sense of hearing and question of sanity and insanity are important to the plot. In the middle of the story, the narrator confirms this when he tells us a "dull, sound", similar to what a watch might make if it is shrouded in cotton, comes to "his ears". The narrator instantly recognizes this sound, it is the "sound of the beating of the old man's heart. ...It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!" He becomes nervous with this sound and says this "strange a noise as this excite[s] me to uncontrollable terror". (Poe, 2006, p.189).

So, it is because of this presumable acuteness of sense of hearing which is irritated by the old man's heart-beating, that the narrator kills him. This further foreshadows the ending of the story, where the beating of the dead old man's heart (either in real or in his own hallucinations) drives him to confess his crime to the three policemen. To conclude, this is how the sequence of the events of the story is ordered, packaged, and presented via plot: The story is embellished with the abruptness and flash-forwarding of the plot.

The second step is Aristotle's categories which help us connect some of the deeper psychological elements of the narrative. One of the three key plot elements identified by Aristotle is the *hamartia*. The term *hamartia* means a 'sin' or 'fault' usually stemming from the character's fatal flaw, which often what leads to their downfall in a tragedy. In a very crude sense, the *hamartia* or 'tragic flaw' of Poe's narrator was "the sense of hearing acute" (Poe, 2006, p. 187). Although the narrator, in the beginning, tells us that it was the old man's vulture-like eye that irritated him, yet as he proceeds with his story, he tells us that it was "the beating of the old man's heart [which] increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage" (Poe, 2006, p. 189).

This 'tragic flaw' of the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" leads to the *peripeteia* which means a reversal of fortune or a 'turn around'. After he kills the old man meticulously and skillfully, dismembering the organs of the old man and then hiding them beneath the planks of the floor, he passes a smile, thinking that he has done the deed carefully and left no traces. Ironically, it is the same beating of the now dismembered heart of the old man that drives him 'mad' and he admits his deed to the officers.

So, the narrator who was a happy man during and after the killing of the old man is now a tragic and crazy man. The ‘anagnorisis’ happens when the narrator realizes that he is not the same person he was trying to prove in the beginning. He realizes that he is a murderer, a psychopath, rather than an innocent man. He admits that his sharp sense of hearing and the dead old man's heart beating has defeated him and led to his fall.

Now, turning towards Gérard Genette's six particular areas which he discusses in his book *Narrative Discourse* (1972). Genette's focus, unlike Aristotle's, is on the act of storytelling, not the tale itself but how the story is told. Peter Barry (2009) poses six questions about how narration works and, using Genette's framework, describes the various ways each one can play out.

Is the basic narrative mode ‘mimetic’ or ‘diegetic’?

‘Mimesis’ means ‘showing’ or ‘dramatizing’. In a narrative, parts presented this way are 'dramatized', meaning they're portrayed with a specific scene, often using dialogue with direct speech. It's a form of 'slow telling' where actions and words are 'staged' for the reader. This is evident in “The Tell-Tale Heart” when the narrative moves from ‘partial’ or ‘mid-mimesis’ to ‘full mimesis’ when the narrator describes the old man's eye, “I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! (‘partial mimesis’ because we do not yet know what type of eye? Which colour eye?) One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it” (Poe, 2006, p.187). ‘Full Mimesis’ is reached here when the information is delayed and when we imagine the shape and the colour of the eye for ourselves. Another fulfilling example of mimetic mode is the narrator's killing of the old man finally, “The old man's hour had come! (‘Partial Mimesis’) With a loud yell (‘Mid Mimesis’), I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—only once. In an instant, I dragged him to the floor and pulled the heavy bed over him” (Poe, 2006, p. 190). Here again, the narrative fluctuates from ‘partial mimesis’, to ‘mid mimesis’ and finally ‘full mimesis’. The writers deliberately use these narrative modes to create dramatic effects. Had the writer not used these modes, we would not have been able to pretend to hear the shrieks of the old man and see the exact way the narrator was killing him.

On the other hand, 'diegesis' refers to 'telling' or 'relating'. When a narrative is presented this way, it's usually more 'rapid', 'panoramic', or 'summarized'. The goal is to convey key information quickly and efficiently, without attempting to make us feel like we're witnessing the events unfold. Instead, the narrator simply tells us what happens, without showing it in real-time (Barry 2009). Poe (2006) uses this mode in the very beginning of “The Tell-Tale Heart” when the narrator tells the readers about his mental state, “True! —nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?” (p. 187). Here, we are not compelled to imagine the nervousness and insanity of the narrator. We are just told that he had been nervous in the past and still is. There is no information given about how and what. Another example of this mode is when the narrator talks about his feelings for the old man, the narrator says that he can't explain how the thought first came to him, but once it appeared, it "haunted me" day and night. There was no "object" or "passion" involved. I "loved" the old man. He had never “wronged” or “insulted” him (p. 187).

Here again, the narrator's feelings for the old man are told in a rather 'summarized' way. There is no delay in the information. There is no action. We do not have any idea how and in what manner was the narrator haunted day and night. The whole story of the past relationship between the narrator and the old man is told in a few sentences. Moreover, all the sequence of the events happens 'off-stage'.

How is the narrative focalized?

Focalization, according to Genette, refers to the 'viewpoint' or 'perspective' from which the story is narrated.' There are different options for this, for example, in 'external' focalization the viewpoint is outside the character depicted so that we are told only things that are visible or observable — that is, what the characters say and do—things readers would notice if they were actually present in the scene (Genette, as cited in Barry, 2009, p. 224).

Contrastingly, 'internal focalization' refers to the thoughts and feelings of the characters, which would remain unknown to the readers, even if they were physically present in the scene (p. 224). Thus, when the narrator explains how he proceeds and removes "three planks from the floor" and positions them between the scantlings, then, he replaces the boards so "cleverly" that nothing appears disturbed [...] There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever" (Poe, 2006, p. 190), is an externally focalized representation of his moment, so readers would hear and see these happenings themselves if they were there when such things occurred.

On the other hand, the sentence such as "Never before that night had I *felt* the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph" (p. 188), is an internally focalized representation of the speaker of the narrative; it provides insight into his feelings and thoughts which he has not expressed directly— and of which readers would not be aware even if they were present beside him. Since the story of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is mainly told with this internal focalization on the old man and the narrator himself, therefore, the narrator can be called the 'focalizer' of the tale (or the 'reflector', in another tradition of narratological terms).

Traditionally, narrators only reflect on the lives and stories of other characters (just like Lockwood and Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*), but in "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrative is narrated in the first-person pronoun; the narrator is both the reflector of his own actions and thoughts and those of the old man. Lye uses the term 'focalized point-of-view' as a substitute to Genette's internal focalization. According to Lye (as cited in Al Thamery, A & Khalifa, J, 2009), the narrator in this such a perspective is a character who is conscious of the act of narration. Such a narrator might be the central character, i.e. the protagonist, as in the case of "The Tell-Tale Heart" or side character or an observer of the main character's actions (p. 19). This 'focalized point-of-view' moreover, is fixed, that is, the whole story passes through the narrator of the story. There is no voice given to the old man and the three policemen. Even the old man's feelings are expressed through the narrator's claims, when he says "I knew it well," expressing his understanding of the old man's feelings and his own internal reaction. He confesses that he "pitied him," even though he

“chuckled at heart.” The old man’s fears have been “ever since growing upon him,” as he tries to convince himself they are “causeless,” but is unable to do so (Poe, 2006, pp. 188-89).

Who is telling the story?

On the surface, the story is narrated by the author, but not necessarily through their own voice or persona. Various types of narrators can be used to tell the story. One type, often associated with a zero-focalized narrative, does not have a distinct identity with a name or personal background. This narrator serves as a voice or tone, often perceived as an impartial, recording consciousness—a simple ‘telling medium’ that seeks neutrality and transparency. Such narrators are referred to as ‘covert,’ ‘effaced,’ ‘non-intrusive,’ or ‘non-dramatized’. This kind of narrator is simply the ‘mouthpiece’ of the author, hence, an ‘authorial persona’, and not the author himself. The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is not this kind of narrator, so we move to the next type.

The other type of narrator is one who is a clearly defined, named character with their own personal background, gender, social class, preferences, and more. These characters have observed, gathered information about, or even been involved in the events they recount. They can be called ‘overt’ or ‘dramatized’, or ‘intrusive’ narrators, just like Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. These dramatized narrators can be of various kinds: the ‘heterodiegetic’ (‘other telling’, since someone else’s story is being told) narrator is one who tells the story but is not a character in the story he or she narrates, but someone who is an outsider—Mr. Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*, for instance. In opposition to this is the ‘homodiegetic’ narrator, who is a character as well as the narrator of the narrative at hand (Genette, 1972, p. 245). The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is also ‘homodiegetic’: he participates in the story he narrates and reflects upon the old man as well. This is best demonstrated when the narrator enters the room of the old man to pick up the lantern but his hand slips and wakes up the old man who is yelling “Who’s there?” (Poe, 2006, p. 188).

How is time handled in the story?

Narratives often include both backward and forward references, meaning the order in which events are told doesn’t always match the order in which they occur (Barry, 2009, p. 226). Sometimes the story will ‘flashback’ to relate an event that happened in the past and such parts of the narrative can be called ‘analeptic’ (from ‘analepsis’, which literally means a ‘back-take’). Similarly, the story might ‘flash forward’ to describe, reference, or predict a future event, and these sections are known as ‘proleptic’ (from the word ‘prolepsis,’ meaning ‘fore-take’). Poe in “The Tell-Tale Heart” does not deploy ‘analepsis’, however, he does employ ‘prolepsis’ at the beginning of the story. This has already been discussed in the story/plot distinction section: the narrator’s heightened sense of hearing allows him to hear sounds from both “heaven and in the earth” (Poe, 2006, p. 187) ‘fore-taking’ his mental collapse and confession of crimes due to the same acuteness.

“The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country” (Poe, 2006, p.190).

In this case, the speech is presented in a 'reported' form, meaning we don't get the exact words spoken (such as 'The shriek is in my dream' or 'The old man is in the country'). Also, the tagging is 'integral', meaning it is embedded within the utterance itself, unlike in examples like 'The shriek, I said' or 'The old man, I mentioned.' This style of reporting creates a sense of formal distancing between the reader and the events being described.

CONCLUSION

The study has analyzed Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" from the perspective of narratology, using the theoretical framework of Peter Barry. The study argued that approaching "The Tell-Tale Heart" through these largely technical narratological frameworks, appears to present new models that illustrate how meaning is shaped in stories and how audiences or readers are involved in the narrative through these techniques. It is through the art of narration, how the story is told, and not the story itself through which dramatic and cathartic effects are created. *What* is said and *how* is said both matter and they complement each other. The study also reveals that this particular tale is just one example of how each individual tale (parole) is a product of the larger system and rules of narratives, that is, langue. Furthermore, studies of narratology, and particularly of stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart", can be extended to other areas such as Cognitive Psychology where mental and emotional engagements and effects of such unreliable, and contradictory narrators can be studied in readers. This will probably result in a deeper understanding of narrative impact and can further enhance literary theory.

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