



Edgar Allan Poe: The Tell-Tale Heart

(1843)

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Genre: Horror, Story. Country: United States.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) has been described as a “supreme artistic achievement” (*Poe* 3:789) and is, together with “The Cask of Amontillado”, a fine example of Poe’s later economy of language that was typical of many of his tales of the 1840s. It was first published in the January 1843 edition of James Russell Lowell’s short-lived journal *The Boston Pioneer* and later slightly revised and published in *The Broadway Journal* for August 1845, with reprints being carried by the Philadelphia *Dollar Newspaper* already as early as January of 1843, and the *Spirit of the Times*, also in Philadelphia, in August of 1845 (*Poe* 3:791-2). The first edition of the tale included as an epigraph a quotation from Longfellow’s poem “A Psalm of Life” (1838), but Poe omitted this in later versions of the text (*Poe* 3:797). Poe had initially submitted the tale for publication in late 1842, in Bradbury and Soden’s *Boston Miscellany*, where it was rejected, with the following amusing comment sent to the author: “If Mr. Poe would condescend to furnish more quiet articles, he would be a most desirable correspondent” (*Poe* 3:791).

Plot wise, the story is simple but horrific, featuring an unnamed narrator who recounts to an unknown listener, perhaps in a prison or confessional setting, how he once obsessed over an old man’s eye and eventually murdered that old man to rid himself of this eye that gave him no peace. Both the old man and narrator occupied the same lodgings, but nothing more is known about their relationship, or even about the narrator’s gender. The fact that the narrator relates events to his anonymous listener after they have occurred further contributes, in classic Poe fashion, to his possible unreliability as participant in or witness to those actions. Poe was a pioneer in his usage of the unreliable narrator, already experimenting with the type in earlier stories such as “Ligeia” (1838), in which the narrator, an opium-addict, recollects grim events from his personal life, including his possible involvement in double murder. Frederick S. Frank and Anthony Magistrale speculate that the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” may unconventionally be a woman “whose whole life has been a confinement to an old dark house” (343). The story can be read as a dramatic monologue that, according to Poe scholar T.O. Mabbott, preserves the classical unities (*Poe* 3:789), and it gradually exposes the narrator as more and more insane even though, ironically, he appears to gain greater confidence in the correctness of his behaviour through his retelling of the hideous events that took place in the household. Also in keeping with Mabbott’s suggestion about the classical unities demonstrated by the tale is Poe’s own idea of the “unity of effect”, involving a streamlined approach to story-writing, one in which only details relevant to a single or preconceived effect are brought into a text. Poe’s famous unified theory of the short story, while initially discussed in his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* for the May 1842 issue of *Graham’s Magazine*, is certainly applicable to the focused narrative of “The Tell-Tale Heart”. It is perhaps this unified effect, together with the psychological power of the tale, that has led to many adaptations over the decades. Notable examples

include the silent film *The Tell-Tale Heart* from 1928, directed by Leon Shamroy, an animated short film of the same name from 1953, narrated by James Mason and nominated for an Academy Award in the category of best animated short film, the 1972 film *An Evening With Edgar Allan Poe* in which Vincent Price recites four of Poe's stories, including "The Tell-Tale Heart", to a live audience, and Steven Berkoff's 1991 adaptation that was initially broadcast on British television. Musical adaptations of the tale also abound, including one by *The Alan Parsons Project* that was released in 1976 on their debut album, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

Mabbott suggests that the story is one of several by Poe founded on "popular superstitions", in this case of the "Evil Eye" that he may have heard about while he was in the army, stationed in South Carolina where African Americans sometimes carried a horse chestnut ("buckeye") as protection (*Poe* 3:789). Of note here is that the old man's eye in Poe's story is veiled by a film, and is therefore, Mabbott believes, to be "regarded with apprehension" since it may be a possible cause of the narrator's madness and not merely a sinister product of his hallucinations. Readers typically assume that the killer-narrator hears the beating of his own heart towards the conclusion of the tale, but equally possible are metaphysical connections and effects stemming from perceived or real "evil eyes" introduced into the text by Poe. The main literary source for Poe's famous tale of terror is a description by Daniel Webster of a crime committed in Massachusetts, when John Francis Knapp employed Richard Crowninshield Jr. to rob and kill an aged man, Joseph White of Salem, on the night of April 6, 1830. Webster, employed as a special prosecutor during Knapp's trial, described the crime as a "new lesson for painters and poets", words that Poe may have taken as a challenge to develop a tale around such events (*Poe* 3:790-1). Also of interest is Webster's pamphlet "Argument on the Trial", in which he comments as follows regarding Knapp's confession to the murder of Joseph White: "Such a secret can be safe nowhere...[t]rue it is, generally speaking, that 'murder will out'... the guilty soul cannot keep its own secret. It is false to itself; or rather it feels an irresistible impulse to be true to itself" (qtd. in *Poe* 3:790). The comment may have been an inspiration for Poe to deal with this other superstition in the tale too, since the narrator finds eventually that he has no choice but to confess to the murder. In a broader context, Poe often tapped into the sensational plots of much pulp Gothic fiction of the early nineteenth century, and into the crimes and trials of the time, for the sources of many of his classic tales.

In the first couple of paragraphs of "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator describes his acute sense of hearing, reminiscent of Roderick Usher's hypersensitivity in that earlier classic tale by Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), and he also outlines his extreme nervousness, being careful to suggest that he is not mad but merely a normal individual afflicted with a "disease" that has strengthened his senses. He is proud of his calmness of manner and proceeds to outline an "idea" that entered his mind and "haunted [him] day and night". The idea does not revolve around the old man's material possessions, or his character, or even his behaviour that was impeccable: it is his eye that troubles the narrator, since it resembles that of a "vulture", being a "pale blue eye, with a film over it". By "degrees" he therefore made up his mind to kill the old man, so as to rid himself of the troublesome eye forever (*Poe* 3:792).

The narrator once again reiterates to his unknown listener that he is not mad, since "madmen know nothing", whereas he is very methodical and wisely proceeded with his plan, also with "caution", "foresight", and "dissimulation". He speaks of how he was very kind to the old man in the week preceding the murder, so as not to attract suspicion. Further outlined by the narrator is his ritual of cautiously peering into the old man's room each night, at exactly midnight, to observe his future victim at sleep. The ritual requires that he carefully unlatch the door to the old man's bedroom, stick his head inside, and very slowly open the lantern he is carrying so that only a "single thin ray [of light falls] upon the vulture eye". Ironically, for those seven nights the narrator is unable to murder the old man since the "eye [is] always closed", and it is the eye itself rather than the old man that "vexe[s]" the narrator. Of significance in the narrator's tale at this point is the chronological aspect of his ritual of observing the old man at sleep, namely that the ritual takes place from midnight to one o'clock in the morning since it takes him "an hour" to place his head fully through the unlatched and opened door. Contrasted with this, in the morning hours, when "day br[eaks]", the narrator converses with the old man

in a “hearty tone” (*Poe* 3:792-3).

Tied to the different times of day is the narrator’s change in behaviour: sinister at night, and hearty and jovial in the morning, which is possibly indicative of a schizoid condition. This is hardly a surprise, since Poe was a pioneer in the exploration of a narrator’s suffering from various conditions, both physical and mental. Further in keeping with such behavioural changes is the narrator’s metonymic, almost fetishistic understanding of the old man, as an object that has some sinister parts (the veiled eye), while others are unthreatening (the rest of his body). In a broader, numerological sense, the seven nights during which the narrator observed the old man and planned his crime are also worthy of note. Seven, numerologically, is a cosmic number often signifying the life cycle, from birth to death, and can also be interpreted as a combination of the numbers three and four: three being a spiritual, transcendental number of unity and balance, and four being a tactile number that locates things in time and space (e.g., the house and room in which the narrator observed the old man; the passage of time so meticulously referenced by the narrator). Of note once again is the fact that the narrator is retelling events to the unknown listener after they have occurred, and so the ironic possibilities in the text are multiplied since, on the surface, the narrator presents himself as most methodical and accurate, whereas, owing to the passage of time and possible errors in his memory, events may not have been as precise as he now presents them to his audience. Put differently, real events may be about brutal, unplanned murder in the tale, while the narrator, through his methodical retelling (i.e., re-imagining) of the scenes, succeeds in presenting himself as more rational and programmatic than would otherwise be the case.

On the fated eighth night, the narrator describes himself as being more cautious than before, and feeling that he is at the height of his powers and “triumph[ant]”. Carefully once again the door is opened to the old man’s bedroom, but the narrator nearly “chuckle[s]” at his murderous idea and the old man moves on the bed, perhaps startled. It is, however, “black as pitch” in the shuttered room, and the narrator pushes on with his plan, placing his head through the opening in the door and about to open the lantern when his “thumb slip[s] upon the tin fastening”, awakening the old man who jumps up in bed and asks who is there. Silence follows for a “whole hour” during which the narrator does not move from his spot and the old man sits as if frozen on his bed, both listening for sounds. The narrator here thinks about how the old man feels, even “pitie[s] him”, while perversely “chuckl[ing] at heart” (*Poe* 3:793-4). Of note here again is the narrator’s sympathy for the old man, yet aversion towards his veiled eye that brings about a perverse, muffled laughter. This muffled laughter has parallels in the later references placed in the tale to how the beating of the old man’s heart sounds like the ticking of a watch when padded with cotton. The muffled ticking-heartbeat that drives the narrator crazy soon after is perhaps anticipated by his own perverse, muffled laughter: a chronologically described chuckling that complements the narrator’s extreme (and possibly ironic) attention to the passage of time in the text. Also significant is the narrator’s mentioning of how for many nights, at midnight, he too sat in bed and was “distracted” by various “terrors” (*Poe* 3:794), much like the old man on this night, a comment that hints at some more sinister, occult influence that may be present in the house: through an “evil eye” other than the old man’s, as suggested by Mabbott. On a broader note, what is referenced through the narrator’s idiosyncratic behaviour here, having both sympathy with and laughing at the old man, is the grey area in which his criminality resides. Dr. Benjamin Rush, in *Sixteen Introductory Lectures* (1811), describes the “remorseful criminal type” of madman (qtd. in *Poe* 3:789), a description that can certainly be applied to the narrator at least on the eighth night of his observation of the old man. The narrator’s cold, perverse “chuckling” on the other hand can also be read as evidence of his complete psychopathological callousness, indicating that Poe is in this text imagining one who kills for no reason and who may also enjoy the act.

The narrator finally opens the lantern and a thin ray of light falls as if by “instinct” (*Poe* 3:795) on the now open “vulture eye” (*Poe* 3:794). This catalyses the narrator’s frenzy and acuteness of sense: he now hears, louder and louder, the beating of the old man’s heart. Fearing that a neighbour will overhear the beating and unable to control his anxiety, the narrator screams that the “old man’s hour ha[s] come”, opens the lantern fully, rushes into the room, drags the old man to the floor and pulls the “heavy bed over him”. The narrator then

“smile[s] gaily” that the deed is done and finds that there is no more “pulsation”, the old man being “stone dead” (*Poe* 3:795-6). That this hideous act occurs on the eighth night of the narrator’s observation of the old man is likely no coincidence. Numerologically, the number eight signifies psychic strength or connections (e.g., the house as an evil eye tormenting both the old man and narrator), and can also be interpreted as representative of the power of free will and its unchecked, unregulated results (e.g., the narrator’s karma). On a different note, Frank and Magistrale describe the murder scene as a “savage burlesque of nursery routine, [with the narrator putting] the old man to bed for the final time by tipping the bed over on him...” (343). The narrator thereby becomes a kind of perverse, paternal figure who puts the old man, as child, to bed, while it was the old man’s “vulture eye” that was initially presented by the narrator as being the reason for his frustrations. The vulture eye, a symbol of paternal surveillance and control in the text, is then literally turned off by the narrator through his murder of the old man. Events that follow are of course ironic, since, rather than leading to the narrator’s freedom from conscience and unbridled willpower, he endures a greater, prolonged agony in his own mind. Even more importantly, what had otherwise and up to this point in the tale been popular superstitions (e.g., evil eyes; “murder will out”) are turned upside down: evil is found not in the old man’s eye, but in the narrator’s mind and actions; it is not the old man’s corpse that acts as main evidence of murder (since it is soon hidden), but rather the narrator’s own diseased and noisy mind, which draws attention to the hideous act.

Following careful dismemberment and concealment of the old man’s body parts underneath the floorboards of his bedroom, all methodically retold by the narrator, there is a knocking at the door by the police at exactly “four o’clock” in the morning (*Poe* 3:796). Again of note is the number four, here returning the narrator into the world of sanity and the room in which he not only finds himself but will have to answer soon for his actions. In a scene similar to inspection by authorities of the narrator’s cellar in Poe’s “The Black Cat” (1843), the narrator in this tale also perversely encourages the officers to inspect the house in detail and suggests that they then rest. Only he knows that they are near the spot where the old man’s body parts are concealed, and the police appear satisfied. However, the arrangement of chairs (in proximity to the body), the officers’ idle chatting, and the narrator’s masked anxiety all work to madden him further so that he either imagines or actually begins hearing the muffled beating of the old man’s heart once again (*Poe* 3:796-7). Unable to control himself any further, and believing that the officers are making a “mockery of [his] horror”, he confesses the crime and screams that they tear up the planks of the floor beneath which, he thinks, the old man’s heart still beats. This measured beating, sometimes describes as a “ticking” in the tale, has been read in various ways. The most common interpretation is that it is the beating of the narrator’s own agitated heart. Another more entertaining possibility is that Poe, through his familiarity with Thomas Wyatt’s *Synopsis of Natural History* (1839), was referencing through this clicking sound in the wooden walls and floors the mating calls of “serricorn” beetles or even smaller insects known as *Atropus pulsatorius* (*Poe* 3:797). This clicking has in literature often been presented in superstitious terms, as a “death-watch”, a phrase the narrator himself uses several pages earlier when describing his tormented late nights during which he listened to death-watches “in the wall” (*Poe* 3:794).

This classic tale of terror by Poe concludes with a brief dénouement that is therefore all the more powerful, engraving a vicious, cosmic justice into the text. Beyond the moral dimension, as seen through the narrator’s struggles with his own demons and the often arbitrary if not downright ironic way in which his plan is brought to completion (e.g., through the slipping of his thumb while holding the lantern clumsily on the eighth night), is that he is not the methodical, all-knowing perfectionist he presents himself to be to his audience, and that he is also not as calm and aloof as he wishes others to believe. The concluding sentences of the tale, for instance, are largely composed of the narrator’s ranting and raving as he tries to outdo the noises supposedly coming from beneath the floor of the room, evocative of the way in which the narrator in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) tries to outdo Fortunato’s screams of despair towards the conclusion of that classic tale of terror. All of this is made even more ironic by the very unreliability of the narration being delivered *after the fact*; however, such a point can also be made about many other tales by Poe, including “The Cask of Amontillado”, in which half a century has passed since the narrator in that tale supposedly committed his foul act. On a final note, it is interesting to consider that while the secrets kept underneath the floorboards by the narrator in “The Tell-Tale

Heart” are most tangible (e.g., body parts), the secrets in his own diseased mind that drove him to this hideous deed are never clarified in the story, Poe preferring in his classic fashion to leave some questions regarding the narrator’s problems in the dark, and in this manner, much like the old man’s vulture eye on the fated eighth night—“wide, wide open” (*Poe* 3:795) for analysis.

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Page references are to Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. 3, Harvard University Press, 1978; and Frederick S. Frank and Anthony Magistrale, *The Poe Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Press, 1997.

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