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Analysis of the Short Story “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe

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Abstract

“The Tell – Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe is a short story written in the genre of horror. It describes the committing of murder and then confessing it due to being tormented by guilty conscious. The paper aims to analyze the story thoroughly including its themes and literary and rhetorical devices. The methodology used for the paper is discourse analysis which essentially reveals socio- psychological characteristics of the protagonist who is an unnamed person, telling a tale about a crime he committed to prove that he is not insane. The paper discusses in detail various aspects of the story which are directly or indirectly connected to the motives and psychological impulsions behind committing the crime by the protagonist. The paper concludes that the story has been written to provide a study of paranoia¹ and mental deterioration.

Key Words- Edgar Allan Poe, Paranoia, Crime, Discourse

Introduction:

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is a story of a nameless person. He explains his being extremely nervous but not that he is insane. To prove that he is not insane, he shares an event from his past. He tells about an old man and that he loved him except his horrible eye. He hated old man’s eye to the extent that decided to kill him. After planning to kill the old man,

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the narrator went to the old man's bedroom consecutively for seven days at midnight. Each night he opened the bedroom door and put in a lantern with adjusted light. The narrator was unable to kill the old man for seven nights because he did not open his eye. It was the eighth night when the eye opened and the old man was killed. Before killing the old man, the narrator threw the lantern's light on his eye. He then dragged him off the bed who could scream only once before being killed. After that the narrator hid every proof of his crime by cutting the body and hiding it under floorboards in the same bedroom. (Poe, 1843)

When he was just finished, three policemen arrived, because someone in the neighborhood had called them hearing a shriek to which the narrator says confidently that he himself had shrieked in nightmare. He further claimed that the old man was out of town. The cops were convinced and the narrator brought them to sit in victim's bedroom. As they talked, the guilty narrator started hearing a sound, ticking and terrible, which got louder and louder until he was unable to take it anymore. Freaking out, he confessed his crime, and told the policemen to discover the dead body which was hidden beneath the floorboards. He stated that the old man's heart was ticking in form of that sound. ² (ibid.)

The aim of this study is to analyze the short story to find out the motives which impulsively acted behind the murder of the old man and then forced the protagonist to confess that he had committed the crime. For this purpose, plot, themes, genre, tone, ending, and title are discussed.

Methodology:

The research adopted in this study is qualitative and the methodology is discourse analysis, which principally aims at revealing socio- psychological characteristics of the protagonist. To highlight the cause-and-effect within the story and prove the various sociological and psychological characteristics of the story, examples from the text are given.

Research Questions:

The paper aims at finding out how the various events of the story are linked up with the central theme of crime and confession by the protagonist.

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Plot Analysis:

The plot of the story is built upon Freytag's Pyramid.³ It comprises of three parts. In the first part the narrator is trying to prove his sanity by telling a story from the past. This part consists of eight nights out of which for seven nights, the narrator peeks into the old man's bedroom while he sleeps. The second part of the plot is all about killing, cutting and hiding the old man's dead body. The part three is about the police turning up and the narrator admitting to them about his crime. As a good story, the plot has all fundamental parts; the initial situation, the conflict, the complication, the climax, the suspense, denouement and finally the conclusion, which Poe has blended together adding spices. The initial situation lies in the fact that the narrator is trying to show and prove his sanity through telling a tale. The conflict is obvious when the narrator continuously for a week, goes to the old man's room every midnight "to do the dirty deed." He cannot kill the old man while he is sleeping because old man's "evil eye" is narrator's problem not the old man himself. The complication part of the plot tells that the old man will not be killed for months if he does not wake up. Murder of the old man is the climax of the story. Much suspense is created by calm and composed attitude of the narrator upon arrival of the police. Later when he guides them in the house and confidently takes them to the murdered old man's bedroom and hears the sound the suspense is at its peak. The denouement part of the plot starts when the noise which narrator is hearing gets louder to the extent that he is unable to tolerate it. To relieve himself and thinking that the noise will stop, he discloses his crime to the policemen. The plot ends when the source of sound is identified by the narrator as "the beating of hideous heart!" (Plot Analysis, 2017)

The plot type of "The Tell- Tale Heart" is identified as Tragedy and it has five stages of anticipation, dream, frustration, nightmare, destruction or death wish stage. In anticipation stage, the narrator tells that the old man has a creepy eye and that he has been harassed by that for a long time to the extent that ultimately he decides to get rid of it. At dream stage, there are eight nights of spying and murder of the old man. The narrator feels frustrated as the police, who have arrived a few minutes after the body is hidden beneath the floor, seem to

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suspect nothing and the ringing in his ears keeps getting louder. The nightmare stage starts when due to the ringing getting louder and louder, the narrator is unable to control the situation. Nobody else seems to hear the sound which leads to the destruction or “death wish” stage. The narrator can no more hide his guilt and reveals it. The end of the story does not quite fit the tragedy mold because the narrator does not die. He only condemns himself by pointing out towards the floor where the body is hidden beneath. (ibid.)

Themes:

The story works on a number of themes and subthemes which are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs:

Humans have evil side: This theme tells that a human being possesses another side of his personality which is perverse and wicked. It is another self which instigates him to do evils without any obvious reason or apparent motive. The narrator admits in the beginning that he had committed the murder that made no sense. “Object there was none. 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.” (Womack, 1997)

Discovery of crime: The theme of discovery of crime tells that the extreme fear of discovery was the cause that led the narrator to disclose his crime. (ibid.)

It is worse to be evil inside than to be evil outside: The theme of being evil from inside and outside explains that the old man is not evil. He only has a hideous and repulsive eye which makes him ugly from outside. On the other hand, the narrator is ugly from inside. He is repulsive by nature and wants to kill an apparently harmless old man. He not only plans but executes the murder also. (ibid.)

Cunning and Cleverness: The main character of the story, that is the narrator himself, promises in the beginning to tell a tale of cunning and cleverness. He then delivers this story. (ibid.)

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Home: Poe had made a mockery of the shopworn phrase “Home is where the heart is” in his “The Tell-Tale Heart.” He expresses anxieties toward the very idea of “home.” His idea of home is connected with a place of violence and death and also disease, anguish, and isolation. Home is portrayed as a place where mysterious hearts tell stories of horror and crime committed at the darkest hours of the night. (ibid.)

Mortality: This short story is a murder mystery. A fear of death prevails in the story. In fact, the story is all about sadness and mourning over merciless death. (ibid.)

Time: The story is obsessed with the idea of time. It is from the “past,” “eight nights” the working on murder happens, “midnight” is the time when the narrator visits the old man and actually kills him. Watch also symbolizes the time which symbolizes moving forward towards death. (ibid.)

Versions of reality: The story disrupts reader’s versions of reality. The narrator is so powerful in this description that the reader is forced to follow and believe whatever he tells. (ibid.)

Guilt is the worst tormentor: Guilty conscience leads the narrator accept his crime in agony. He is not suspected and he completes his task perfectly like an expert criminal. Yet his conscience does not let him rest and torments him to the extent that he is troubled to admit to policemen what he has done. The story makes it clear that the truth cannot be contained and the guilt always dominates the decision to tell a lie or to hide the truth. (ibid.)

Crime and punishment: The prevailing theme of crime and punishment states that every person who commits a crime and tries to hide it cannot escape punishment. One reason or the other leads him to punishment although he leaves no sign of his crime. (ibid.)

Insanity: The story is based on insanity. The way the narrator insists on his sanity and the procedure he adopted to execute his plan of murder, then hiding the body and then

admitting his crime is enough to prove his insanity. Moreover he accepts that he has done wrong just being irritated by hearing the ticking sound. (ibid.)

Setting:

The only setting of the story is known is that it takes place inside a house. Even the details of the house are not given. The old man keeps his shutters locked. It seems that the house is in an urban location and may be in a location where crime rate is relatively high. The inside of the house is only known so far as the old man's bedroom is concerned. This is even scarier that the details about bedroom are not given and the old man is sleeping completely unaware. The bedroom also signifies that the narrator unable to see his own mind just as he is not able to see into the bedroom. (ibid.)

Narrator's Point of View:

The Tell-Tale Heart is a Gothic horror story which is told in 1st person point of view. It is a dramatic monologue told from the perspective of a person who has committed a murder. Through telling the story from 1st person point of view, Poe lets the readers creep into the mind of the criminal and creates a nervous and suspense effect to the story. He is an unreliable, deranged person and the readers assess this aspect of his personality from his style of telling a tale. He has not got a name may be due to Poe wanting to show that he represents every human being especially anyone who has ever behaved impulsively. This brings universality to the story and explains that every such person has to pay for what he has done. (Wheeler, n.d.)

The narrator is trying to prove his sanity and the proof he provides is his ability to act and speak in a way to hide his feelings about the old man and his intentions to kill him. This dissimulation is a proof of his sanity according to him. He further admits that he has a sharp hearing and that he can "hear all things in the heaven and in the earth [and] many things in hell." Occasionally, he pretends to be an omniscient narrator by telling the feeling and fears of the old man also. "... I knew it was the groan of mortal terror." So his insight into the old

man's mind is a reflection of his own experience. In this moment, he is behaving in empathy by harmonizing his and the old man's feeling together. (ibid.)

Genre:

"The Tell Tale Heart" is written as Gothic horror, which as genre has its focus on guilt and as well as psyche of the narrator. However there are many sub-genres within this genre and this story falls in the category of Southern Gothic tradition which deals with anxiety as it is obvious from analysis of the narrator's character. (Genre, 2017)

The story has been written in chaotic writing style. The sentences carry a curious effect to the extent that each sentence can open up a debate. Groups of short sentences are there, like, "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man," spinning a web of complications. Longer sentences like, "So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily – until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye." are not ambiguous and frustrating yet give a precise description. (ibid.)

Tone:

The story carries a nervous and sad tone. The narrator is so pathetic and probably physically ill. The narrator seems to have had a pretty bad life, which probably only gets worse after the murder and subsequent confession. According to Poe, melancholy is the most legitimate tone out of all poetical tones and this tone is found blended with the nervousness in narrator's style of storytelling. This is, in fact, the story of a man who is sick from mind as well as from body and is in a severe stress. The sad tone of the story makes him a sad figure in spite of being a murderer. (Fisher, 2002)

There are many words used in the story such as "dreadfully, acute, disease, hearken, hell, mad, sharpened," etc. in the very beginning which set the horrifically suspenseful mood of the story as horror. These words also foreshadow the terrible events that are going to place later. A mood of paranoia also prevails throughout the story because the narrator feels that the old man's eye is like vulture's eye and run his blood cold. The suspense in the mood of the

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story is observed in spying, murdering and interviewing by police. So many suspenseful questions keep on arising in the mind of reader since very beginning till the end of the story. (ibid.)

Title:

The title clearly refers to the beating of old man's heart. The heart also “tells tales” to the narrator which can be based on real or imagined events. The old man’s heart first time is mentioned beating in the eighth night of the narrator’s surveillance, when he realizes that something is wrong in his room. Then again the heart is mentioned after the old man is dead. Since the dead hearts do not beat, it is the narrator's guilt for murdering the old man that is evident through heartbeat. In this way the heart is telling the tale of guilt feelings. The title also refers to the narrator's heart from which the story of the old man is told and inside which the feelings of agitation, guilt and evil live and lead towards his tragic end. (McAndrews, 2012)

Ending:

The invisible man, in Ralph Ellison's novel “Invisible Man” says, “The end [is] in the beginning.” The end of “The Tell-Tale Heart” also takes place even before the beginning of the narrator’s story. The short story is linear in structural. The beginning starts with the conversation that is in fact the middle of a previous conversation with someone: “True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?” May be he is talking about this after the body is discovered and interrogation is in process. May be much time has passed, he was sentenced or he is availing a psychiatric facility. May be he is about to be released after completion of his sentence and his release is subject to his proof of sanity. Literal end of the story is interesting in a sense that the narrator calls the policemen villains. He accuses them of “dissembling,” the thing he himself has done in the beginning of the story by acting sweetly to the old man but actually desiring to kill him. He calls this behavior proof of his sanity while at the end he is accusing the policemen of acting as if they do not suspect him. (ibid.)

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Conclusion:

“The Tell- Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s shortest stories, written to provide a study of paranoia and mental deterioration. Avoiding of details helps to intensify the impact of narrator’s obsession with specific entities like old man’s eye, heartbeat and claim of his sanity. Pointed and economic language contributes much to establish the relationship of language and themes. The story also highlights the psychological contradictions that contribute to a murderous profile. Moreover there is a tension between love and hate capacities of the narrator; he loves the old man but he hates his vulture’s eye. This paradox explained by Poe half a century before Freud made it a leading concept in his theories of mind and explore the psychological complication of human mind that people sometimes harm even those persons whom they love or need in life. The words, the phrases and the sentences analyzed, highlight that the narrator has got a special ability of storytelling in a precise and complete manner and Poe uses his narration, his syntax and plot construction also, in a way to oppose his narrator in his plea to prove himself sane.

Endnotes-

1. State of extreme anxiety or fear, often leading to delusion or irrationality.
2. The story “The Tell-Tale Heart” was first published in 1843. Pioneer, a Boston magazine was first to publish it.
3. Gustav Freytag, a 19th Century German novelist who for the sake of analyzing, developed a diagram for common pattern in plots of stories.

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