

Katie Snyder

Major American Writers

Burton

As Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" opens, the narrator frames the story and declares to us that he is not mad. The audience is immediately suspicious, as sane individuals rarely must clarify their sanity. But the audience he continually addresses is not the true target of the narrative. Rather, the story is an unconvincing attempt by the speaker to verify his mental health to himself. Additionally, the framing is ambiguous, as it suggests the events have already taken place without ever articulating a new setting. The narrator's credibility is therefore initially brought into question.

Poe constructs a complex paradox between form and content in this story. The narrator claims his sanity based on "how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (Poe 715). Indeed, the account is structurally sound, and the voice of the speaker is calm and reasoned. However, the content of the story betrays the insanity of the narrator. The audience is also aware of the contrast between the tone of the speaker and the tone of the subject. Rather than being horrified or saddened by his brutal killing of the old man, he is cheerful and proud. Through the speaker's direct dialogue with his audience, he attempts to create a persuasive argument for his sanity, however this dialogue turns progressively inward and his madness is instead assured. Poe's writing allows the audience to feel that the speaker has

employed self-construction in the narrative. Though his appeals are unconvincing, he nonetheless presents the facts to his audience in a way that he believes will assure his sanity. The speaker emphasizes the precision and care in his act, saying, "I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye – not even *his* – could have detected anything wrong. There was no stain to wash out – no stain of any kind – no blood spot whatever. I had been too wary for that" (717). The detail and attention of his act is stressed so as to convince the audience of his cunning rather than his insanity.

The narrator is also the *only* character in the story that speaks to the audience. This emphasizes the strength of internal forces in this story. The role of the police provides a pertinent example of internal forces being more important than external. Though the police visit ruins the narrator, their role in the story is passive. In the final confession, the speaker debates only with himself; "It [the noise] 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!" (Poe 718). The police have no explicit dialogue in the story, as they are present only to enable the speaker's delusion to play out. This motif of internal struggle is Poe's primary concern in the narrative, and therefore all other characters are subordinate.

At the start of the story there is foreshadowing of the killer's downfall; "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" (Poe 715). He cites a disease as the cause for his acute senses, but plainly claims that madness is not the cause. Perhaps, then, the

disease is his desire to kill. Once settled upon committing his crime, the speaker has to dehumanize the old man. He says,

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! – yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; as 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 forever.

(Poe 715)

It is not the old man whom the narrator wishes to remove, but his eye. By isolating the old man's identity to only his eye, the narrator is able to not only commit the murder, but also enjoy it. He personifies the eye, calling it "evil" and therefore justifying its destruction as a necessity. After the murder, he further tries to dehumanize the old man by dismembering him. However even after isolating the individual parts that make up the man, in his paranoia, the narrator hears the beating heart. This beating confirms the humanity of the old man that the narrator wishes to deny.

Poe often wrote in the grotesque style, and much of his work was focused on terror and death. This work is an example of the Gothic and Romantic elements that influenced much of his work. The emphasis on strong emotions, particularly those of terror, and supernatural motivations are consistent with the Romantic style. This story lacks the Romantic focus on nature, but substitutes this focus for a much more comprehensive description of the human psychology. Additionally, "The Tell-Tale Heart" is written like a Gothic mystery, although it is much different than other such

stories, such as Poe's "The Purloined Letter." In this story, the audience knows who commit the crime from the start, however the killer's psychology is impossible to understand and constitutes the mystery.

Poe constructs an incredibly convoluted character in this short story, but this speaker is never formally introduced. In just a few pages, Poe manages to create a strong persona that sends chills down our spine, yet this character is nameless. By creating an anonymous killer, Poe suggests to the audience that his character represents humanity more generally, and the tenuous separation between sanity and madness in us all.