

Ruhr-Universität Bochum  
Englisches Seminar

The Rhetorical Structure and Possible Interpretations  
of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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# 1 Introduction

With his “Tell-Tale Heart”, Poe offered fascinating material to scholars all over the world. The interesting narrative structure of the text and the fact that it provides relatively few pieces of information gives room for several possibilities of examination and interpretation in diverse directions.

This term paper analyzes the rhetorical structure of the tale and explains the main rhetorical devices of classical oration that Poe used to establish a convincing crime story. Furthermore it introduces the most important topics that can be examined with reference to the text: Firstly, we will look at the “Evil Eye” as the motive for the crime, and the consideration whether it is more likely a symbol than a physical part of the victim; and secondly, we will occupy ourselves with the narrator and especially with his or her state of mind - and the question whether it is in fact a male or a female person that tells us the story.

## 2 Rhetorical Devices

Poe’s art of writing is based on the knowledge of traditional rhetorical handbooks, especially on Hugh Blair’s *Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*; he adapted some of Blair’s ideas to create a solid structure of his tales, including “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 29). By examining “The Tell-Tale Heart”, we can find some typical parts of classical oration (*ibid.*) which will be explained in the following sections. Note: Although we do not know if the narrator is male or female, I will stick to the male pronouns “he” and “his” in order to make reading easier. Considerations whether the narrator might be a male or a female person follow in section 3.3.

### 2.1 praeparatio

According to Zimmerman, “The Tell-Tale Heart” begins with a *praeparatio*: The narrator prepares his audience for the topic he wants to discuss. In this case, he tries to convince the reader that the murderer is not mad or has got a mental disease. However, he points out that the deed is not done because of overwhelming aggression but that it is the eye’s “fault” that the man was killed - this stylistic device called *aetiologia* makes sure that a reason for something already done is given. Poe uses these rhetorical techniques in an ironic way: Although the eye of an old man is no reason to kill a person for mentally healthy people, the narrator believes that his *aetiologia* is a justifiable cause and sticks to his view throughout the whole tale.

Concurrent to the *aetiologia* is the *dicaelogia*; not only the *giving* of a reason, but also the *defiance* of an act (“Whenever [the eye] 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 forever.” (Poe 568))(Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 36-38).

## 2.2 exordium

The first two paragraphs serve as *exordium* or *prooemium*, an introduction that the narrator uses to appeal to his audience in a positive manner; it includes the *narratio*, which means that the narrator briefly explains the state of affairs in advance (Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 35-36) by mentioning all persons involved in the story and his feelings towards the old man (“I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire.” (Poe 568)) as well as the tale’s core - the murder and its motive (“I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! [...] 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 forever.” (*ibid.* 568)). The narrator’s description is also a call for *pathos*, for emotions - he emphasizes that *he*, the murderer, is the real victim in the whole story, because he is pressurized by the Evil Eye and sees no possibility to escape from it except to kill the old man, whom he actually loves (Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 37).

## 2.3 confirmatio/confutatio

*Confirmatio* means that one introduces his or her strongest positive arguments while in a *confutatio* the opposite opinions are refused. These two rhetorical devices are combined in the third paragraph of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and make up the main part of the tale (Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 35).

The narrator takes up the silent reproach that he suffers from insanity (“You fancy me mad.” (Poe 568)) and refutes it instantly by his argument that “[m]admen [knew] nothing” (*ibid.* 569), followed by the explanation that he acted “wisely” and prides himself “with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation [he] went to work!” (*ibid.* 569) to indicate that *he* knew *well*, which culminates in his triumphant cry: “Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this?” (*ibid.* 569).

The speaker also argues why he has not killed the old man in the nights before when he makes clear that he “found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye.” (*ibid.* 569)

In this connection it is remarkable for Zimmerman that Poe makes use of *paradiastole* - the utilization of euphemisms - especially in the third paragraph of the tale, to make something negative sound positive (Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 39). In the hope that his audience adopts his point of view and the values supported by him, the narrator uses positive terms such as “caution” and “foresight” to describe his actions although one might also replace these expressions with “sneakiness” or “scheming” (Zimmerman, *Rhetoric and Style* 39). Certainly a mentally healthy narrator would rather replace the “sagacity” which the murderer feels with unscrupulousness.

Zimmerman also points out that the conclusion, or *peroratio*, is missing in “The Tell-Tale Heart” (*ibid.* 35). Instead of giving a summary and a final statement of the case, the narrator is not able to argue anymore and his telling only bespeaks mania (*ibid.* 35-36) when he finishes with “and now-again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!—/ ‘Villains!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed?<sup>[sic]</sup>—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!’” (Poe 575).

There are other works that occupy themselves with rhetorical strategies in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, such as Dern’s that traces back the meanings of the sentences to the way they are grammatically constructed (Dern).

## 3 Main Analysis Topics

### 3.1 The Eye as a Symbol

Pitcher mentions that the eye is the same as the “I” due to their common sound - so the murderer and the victim are in fact both the same person (Pitcher 232). He also refers to the science of physiognomy, which claims that every aspect of man’s nature has got a physical counterpart: The genitalia stand for the animal, the heart for the moral, and the eye for the intellect of a human being, so the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” symbolically kills his reason and intellect (*ibid.* 232). The old man - with his “Evil Eye” (Poe 569) and his “hideous heart” (*ibid.* 575) - is the personified moral and intellect separated from the speaker (Pitcher 232).

Kirkland, however, is sure that the usage of the Evil Eye is based on the old belief that some people can harm others physically or mentally with their vicious look (Kirkland). This myth is widespread and occurs in sixty-seven cultures, inter alia in those in Scotland and Britain, where Poe lived for some years, so it might be possible that he heard of such tales (Kirkland 136). During these “events”, someone who can’t influence his or her power over others injures another person, sometimes someone he or she is close to, with the gaze of his or her Evil Eye. In doing so the

said person has in fact no intention of being evil (*ibid.* 137). Both folk tradition and fictional literature describe the same effects: The glance can cause diseases, psychological effects, or even death (*ibid.* 139). That is what the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” describes when he complains that the old man’s eye “vexed” him and makes him feel “very, very dreadfully nervous” (Poe 568, 569). He takes the lantern, a symbolic eye, as a tool to terrorize his aged housemate in return; it serves as a talisman to protect its owner against the real Evil Eye (Kirkland 140). The narrator takes the lantern to blind the eye, then he pulls the bed over his victim to protect himself from the vicious look, and finally separates the head, or the eye, from the rest of the body (*ibid.* 142). Summarized, Kirkland points out that Poe used old traditional beliefs and rituals for his crime story (*ibid.* 144).

## 3.2 The Question of the Narrator’s Sanity

### 3.2.1 Symptoms of Schizophrenia

Although “Dementia Praecox” was not seen as an own mental abnormality and the term “schizophrenia” had not been formed in the age when Poe lived, the narrative structure of “The Tell-Tale Heart” allows us to interpret the narrator as an almost typical paranoid schizophrenic, as proved by Zimmerman in 1992 (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia*). According to him, several indicators are given that fit to the profile of such a mentally ill person:

A main aspect is that frequently auditory hallucinations occur, that is, hearing sounds that are not real (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 40). At the beginning, the narrator describes his “sense of hearing acute” (Poe 568) and explains that he “heard all things in the heaven and in the earth” (Poe 568). Later, he also claims to hear the “low, dull, quick sound” (*ibid.* 572) of the old man’s heart, and he insists on the fact that this sound was not *within* his ears (*ibid.* 574). That leads us to the next criterion to diagnose schizophrenia in the narrator’s psyche: The lack of insight (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 41). Not to realize that their way of thinking is disturbed is widespread amongst people who suffer from schizophrenia (*ibid.* 41). This phenomenon also befalls the tale’s narrator - he lays his unusual way of perception on a sensorial disease (“And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses?” (Poe 572)). That it might be a mental restriction that he experiences does not occur to him (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 41). Zimmerman argues that the narrator’s supposedly oversensitive perception goes hand in hand with a further indicator to diagnose schizophrenia: An exaggerated sense of self-esteem - the narrator praises himself and his genius

(*ibid.* 41). His self-importance becomes clear on several passages, when he points out how clever he managed both to plan and carry out the murder and to hide the corpse (“You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!” (Poe 569), “[...] would a madman have been so wise as this, [...]” (*ibid.* 569), “Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity.” (*ibid.* 570), “[I took] wise precautions [...] for the concealment of the body.”(*ibid.* 573)). But although he is self-satisfied, he shows tendencies to mood swings, another typical symptom of the illness (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 42).

The speaker starts his narration as he promises: healthily and calmly. Apart from some enthusiastic insertions he describes the scenario relatively calmly, until he mentions the beating of the old man’s heart (*ibid.* 42). At this point, Poe makes use of diverse rhetorical devices, such as repetitions (“It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!” (Poe 572)), exclamations - shown by the frequent use of exclamation marks -, and dashes, to make clear the hysteria that the narrator experiences in that moment (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 42). It lasts until he sets out the murder itself, then he calms down again (*ibid.* 42). However, after the description of the police’s visit in the house and the repeated rising of the heartbeat sound, the narrator collapses again (*ibid.* 42), which becomes clear when he repeats again and again: “and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!*” (Poe 575). Sometimes his expressions show the inappropriate feelings he experiences - according to Zimmerman, another indicator for schizophrenia (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 42) -, for instance, when the narrator mentions that he has to chuckle (Poe 570, 571) or that he is pleased about the tub that caught all the blood (*ibid.* 573). He also assumes that the audience shares his feelings, because he is sure that it would have “laughed to see how cunningly [he] thrust [his head] in!” (*ibid.* 569).

Negative feelings such as violence, anger, anxiety, and argumentativeness can also appear as concomitants of schizophrenia (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 43). In this case, it is violence turned outward against another person and not against oneself, concomitant with anger, and by telling that he had been and is “very, very dreadfully nervous” (Poe 268), the narrator shows his anxiety (Zimmerman, *Schizophrenia* 43). Delusions of persecution can also occur in connection with the disease - and indeed do when we consider the last paragraph of the tale: The narrator is sure that the policemen with their “hypocritical smiles” mock him and his pain so that he finally gives way, calls his guests “villains”, and reveals what he has done (*ibid.* 43).

### 3.2.2 Symptoms of Sadism/Masochism

While Witherington gives food for thought with his theory that “anyone canny enough to carry out such a crime might be canny enough to disguise his own motives” (Witherington 472) - which means that the murderer might utter extra absurd claims of mental health so that everyone brands him as mad -, Pritchard does not see the narrator’s deed as an indicator for madness, but for a psychosexual reaction on sadism (Pritchard). The tale allows us an insight into the psyche of an egocentric man who gets satisfied by doing harm to others which also becomes clear by the chosen “sexual” terms like the “conceived” idea that “entered” his brain, and his head that he “thrust” in, as well as the statement that the murderer “loved the old man” (Poe 568-569) (Pritchard 144-145).

Another indicator for sadistic tendencies is the egocentric need of telling others proudly about his crime (*ibid.* 145, 146). Furthermore the narrator claims to love his victim, but he also hates the other man, and kills him although he pities him (*ibid.* 145). At the same time the speaker enjoys to be able to rule over the life of another person (*ibid.* 145). According to Pritchard, the narrator sees the policemen as sadists who like his agony, which is a hint that he is not only a sadist, but also a masochist (*ibid.* 146).

### 3.3 The Narrator’s Gender

Rajan points out that the narrator might indeed be a female person (Rajan). The standard interpretation that is based on the theory of the Oedipal phase is that the murder of the old man is a symbol for castration; an act for getting rid of suppression and for taking the powerful place of the old man (Rajan 291). The final collapse and his confession result from the gaze of the policemen, which ascribes him again into a passive, less powerful role (Rajan 293).

According to Rajan, assuming that the speaker is a woman throws a different light on the whole story: The female narrator takes her father in and cares for him, and playing her role as a nurturer, she acts as if she was solicitous about him when she was “inquiring how he has passed the night” (Poe 569). She wants to get rid of the male domination and decides to kill him (Rajan 295). By choosing the bedroom as the place of the murder, we are able to interpret the scenery as one with an implied sexual overtone. As an attacker in a male position, the woman overtakes the man and forces him to receive her like a rape (Rajan 295). She even portrays herself in male terms (Rajan 395) when she asks her audience “would a madman have been so wise as this?” (Poe 569) - especially because she sees herself not as a mad man,

but as a healthy woman.

The policemen, who introduced themselves to the lady “with perfect suavity”, explain that they were called because of a shriek that some neighbours have heard from the direction of the woman’s house (Poe 573). The male gaze of the Law takes her new acquired power and makes her fall back into her typical female position as a repressed object, and she confesses the deed (Rajan 296).

## 4 Conclusion

On the basis of the interpretations above, we can see that “The Tell-Tale Heart” gives much leeway for exegesis. Interestingly enough, this full range of well-founded views can only be possible because of the lack of information: We do not know who the narrator is, or in which relationship he or she stands with the old man, neither where and how they exactly live, nor why this tale is actually told.

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## 6 Honesty Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted is my own and that all passages and ideas that are not mine have been fully and properly acknowledged. I am aware that I will fail the entire course should I include passages and ideas from other sources and present them as if they were my own.

Bochum, 2010-02-24

Signature