

Edgar Allan Poe's Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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THE current ethical turn in narrative studies suggests a congenial context in which to clear up a long-term misunderstanding about Edgar Allan Poe's aesthetic theory. Critics widely held that Poe's aestheticism covers prose fiction as well as poetry, but a close examination of Poe's relevant essays reveals that Poe, in effect, holds a non-aesthetic view of the subject matter of prose fiction. In this genre, Poe makes an unequivocal distinction between structural design and subject matter. While putting the structural design of prose fiction completely on a par with that of poetry (both confined to the aesthetic trajectory), Poe treats the subject matter of prose fiction as different in nature from that of poetry—as often based on Truth and diametrically opposed to Beauty. Nevertheless, Poe's very different conception

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of the subject matter in prose fiction has eluded generations of critics.¹ Poe's "Truth," though, has a much wider application than "Truth" in what Poe calls "the heresy of *The Didactic*"—the assumption "that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth" and that "Truth" simply means the inculcation of a moral.² For Poe, however, "Truth" constitutes the basis for a wide range of modes of thought and expression, including but not confined to the ethical. If some of Poe's tales convey a moral, then that moral tends to be implicit and inseparable from the structural "unity of effect." At the same time, Poe's tales may react or respond to their cultural context. For instance, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) displays a characteristic interaction among a structurally unified dramatic irony, an implicit moral, and Poe's response to the contemporary controversy over the "insanity defense."

Commenting on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), Poe observes:

We have said that the tale has a point of superiority even over the poem. In fact, while the *rhythm* of this latter is an essential aid in the development of the poem's highest idea—the idea of the Beautiful—the artificialities of this rhythm are an inseparable bar to the development of all points of thought or expression which have their basis in *Truth*. But Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale. . . . The writer of the prose tale, in short, may bring to his theme a vast variety of modes or inflections of thought and expression—the ratiocinative, for example, the sarcastic or the humorous) which are not only antagonistical to the nature of the poem, but absolutely forbidden by one of its most peculiar and indispensable adjuncts; we allude of course, to rhythm. It may be added, here, *par parenthèse*, that the author

¹ An obvious reason for this oversight is that critics soon associated Poe with the label "Art for Art's sake," and that they have formed a permanent posthumous association of Poe with the late-nineteenth-century movement of "aestheticism." See Rachel Polonsky, "Poe's Aesthetic Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 42–56. I am very grateful to Seymour Chatman, Li Jin, J. Hillis Miller, James Phelan, Ning Sheng, Donald Stone and Michael Toolan for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² See Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle" (1850), in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p. 75.

who aims at the purely beautiful in a prose tale is laboring at great disadvantage. For Beauty can be better treated in the poem.³

According to Poe, it is in effect the genre-specific “rhythm” that makes Beauty “the sole legitimate province of the poem,”⁴ while the prose tale is open to a wide range of thematic materials that “have their basis in *Truth*” and are “antagonistical” to Beauty. This non-aesthetic thematic conception has been blocked from critical view by Poe’s consistent aesthetic conception of formal design. For Poe all works of literary art should achieve the most important “unity of effect” (review of *Twice-Told Tales*, p. 571). In order to obtain structural unity, the writer of a prose narrative, like the writer of a poem, should preconceive a single effect and then invent and combine events for this “pre-established design.” Moreover, in order to preserve unity of effect, a prose narrative, like a poem, should be fairly short, able to “be read at one sitting” (review of *Twice-Told Tales*, p. 572).

Since behind Poe’s consistent emphasis on aesthetic formal design lies his non-aesthetic conception of the tale’s subject matter, Poe regards Hawthorne’s work as an exemplar of good prose writing, and he readily stresses Hawthorne’s ethical concerns. In his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe writes:

It would be a matter of some difficulty to designate the best of these tales; we repeat that, without exception, they are beautiful.

³ Edgar Allan Poe, rev. of *Twice-Told Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Graham’s Magazine*, May 1842; rpt. in *Essays and Reviews*, p. 573; further references are to this edition and appear in the text. In “The Poetic Principle” Poe makes it clear that he cherishes “as deep a reverence for the True as ever inspired the bosom of man,” but he would exclude it from the realm of poetry because Truth is incompatible with the “efflorescence” of the poetic language: “The demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All *that* which is so indispensable in Song, is precisely all *that* with which *she* has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox, to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing a truth, we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical. *He* must be blind, indeed, who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth” (Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” p. 76).

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), in *Essays and Reviews*, p. 16.

“Wakefield” is remarkable for the skill with which an old idea—a well-known incident—is worked up or discussed. A man of whims conceives the purpose of quitting his wife and residing *incognito*, for twenty years, in her immediate neighborhood. Something of this kind actually happened in London. The force of Mr. Hawthorne’s tale lies in the analysis of the motives which must or might have impelled the husband to such folly, in the first instance, with the possible causes of his perseverance. Upon this thesis a sketch of singular power has been constructed. . . .

. . . “The Minister’s Black Veil” is a masterly composition of which the sole defect is that to the rabble its exquisite skill will be *caviare*. The *obvious* meaning of this article will be found to smother its insinuated one. The *moral* put into the mouth of the dying minister will be supposed to convey the *true* import of the narrative; and that a crime of dark dye, (having reference to the “young lady”) has been committed, is a point which only minds congenial with that of the author will perceive. . . .

“The White Old Maid” is objectionable, even more than the “Minister’s Black Veil,” on the score of its mysticism. Even with the thoughtful and analytic, there will be much trouble in penetrating its entire import. (review of *Twice-Told Tales*, pp. 574–75)

Two interrelated points are worth noticing here. First, being “beautiful” is not so much an end as a means for conveying the thematic import of the prose narrative. Second, if the skill of the work inhibits readers’ comprehension of the true import of the narrative, then the skill will be regarded as defective.

It is significant that Hawthorne’s tale “Wakefield,” which Poe much appreciated, is marked by strong ethical concerns. The omniscient narrator welcomes the reader “to ramble with [him] through the twenty years of Wakefield’s vagary” in order to find the “moral” of Wakefield’s marital delinquency.⁵ The narrator, from an ethical position superior to that of the protagonist, persuades his reader of the morbid vanity, selfishness, and ruthlessness that underlie Wakefield’s folly. The narrative ends with the following moral: “Amid the seeming confusion

⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Wakefield,” in his *Twice-Told Tales*, ed. William Charvat and Fredson Bowers, et al., vol. 9 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974), p. 131; further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe" ("Wakefield," pp. 52–53). Although Poe, out of a strong concern for dramatic effects, avoided such explicit moral teaching by an omniscient narrator, he has in some of his tales, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart," implicitly and subtly conveyed a moral through unified structural design.

Poe's insistent emphasis on aesthetic structural unity has caused many critics to overlook his non-aesthetic and ethically related conception of the subject matter of prose fiction. This underlies the widely held view of Poe as being closely associated, in the domain of prose fiction as well as that of poetry, with "Art for Art's sake." Critics have argued that "Poe banished 'the didactic' from the proper sphere of art," and that there is "an apparent lack of interest in moral themes throughout Poe's work."⁶ Vincent Buranelli more specifically asserts that "sin and crime are absent from" Poe's fictional world, because "Poe does not touch morality" and "the terrible deeds that abound there are matters of psychology, abnormal psychology, not of ethics."⁷

John Cleman extends Poe's "aesthetic" of poetry to prose narrative, and then differentiates between the two genres only in terms of aesthetic concerns: "To some degree, this seeming indifference to moral issues can be explained by Poe's aesthetic in which the 'Moral Sense,' 'Conscience,' and 'Duty' have, at best, 'only collateral relations' with the primary concerns: for poetry '*The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*,' and for prose fiction 'the unity of effect or impression' ("Irresistible Impulses," pp. 623–24).⁸ Such differentiation between the two genres is undesirable since, in Poe's view, "the unity of effect or impres-

⁶ See Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 285; and John Cleman, "Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defense," *American Literature*, 63, (1991), 623.

⁷ Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961), p. 72.

⁸ Cleman quotes from Poe's "Poetic Principle" and 1842 review of *Twice-Told Tales*.

sion” is as important for poetry as for prose fiction. The real difference between the two genres lies in subject matter: Beauty for poetry, and Truth for prose fiction. When critics acknowledge Poe’s concern with “Truth” in prose narrative, they tend simply to drag it into the aesthetic trajectory. John S. Whitley, for instance, writes: “While the highest idea of a poem is the idea of the Beautiful, Poe argues that the aim of the tale is Truth. . . . but perhaps by ‘Truth’ he really meant the working of every part of the story—rhythm, plot, character, language, references—towards a denouement which ends the story logically, consistently and satisfactorily.”⁹ Thus, Poe’s separation of the structural design and subject matter of the tale is unwittingly transformed into a unified conception hinging solely on the unity of effect. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, even as he challenges the traditional view that Poe disregarded morality, is still confined to structural unity: “According to Poe, the supreme criterion for the literary performance is not truthfulness, moral or otherwise, but rather unity” (“Murder as a Fine Art,” p. 286). Like many other critics, Moldenhauer puts the genre of prose fiction completely on a par with poetry, and, in challenging the traditional view of Poe’s disregard for morality in literature, he limits his discussion to what Poe means by “Beauty,” treating the subject matter of poetry as the subject matter of literature in general.¹⁰ As a result, Moldenhauer’s effort to bring morality back to Poe’s theory of literature—through “aesthetic supermorality” (“Murder as a Fine Art,” p. 289)—only adds to the misunderstanding of Poe’s view on the subject matter of prose fiction.¹¹

⁹ John S. Whitley, “Introduction,” in Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination: Selected Stories* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993), p. xii.

¹⁰ See Moldenhauer, “Murder as a Fine Art,” pp. 286–89.

¹¹ Moldenhauer takes it that Poe’s dissatisfaction with allegory “is firmly grounded in his theory of the separateness of aesthetic and didactic ends” (“Murder as a Fine Art,” p. 286). But a scrutiny of Poe’s relevant work will reveal that Poe’s dissatisfaction actually arises from the following two factors: first, allegory’s injury to “the most vitally important point in fiction—that of earnestness or verisimilitude”; and second, and less important, the interference of allegory with the “unity of effect” because of the coexistence of the “obvious” meaning and “the suggested meaning” (Edgar Allan Poe, rev. of *Twice-Told Tales and Mosses from an Old Manse*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, November 1847; rpt. in *Essays and Reviews*, pp. 583, 582). In Poe’s eyes, the

Keeping Poe's non-aesthetic conception of the tale's subject matter in mind, I will proceed to an investigation of the connections between implicit morality, structural unity, and historical context in "The Tell-Tale Heart." I start with a discussion of criticism's failure to see a connection between structural unity and an overall dramatic irony in "The Tell-Tale Heart," a connection that subtly conveys a moral that goes far beyond the conventional "crime and legal-punishment" motif. I will then discuss the relation between the tale and its relevant historical context.



"The Tell-Tale Heart" is about a neurotic man's murder of an old man living in the same house because he finds the old man's "vulture eye" unbearable to him.¹² After spying on the sleeping old man at midnight for a week with the intention to kill him, the protagonist jumps into the old man's room on the eighth night, murders him, dismembers the body, and buries it under the floor. When three policemen come to search the house, he hears the increasingly loud beating of the old man's heart, and takes it that the policemen have also heard it but pretend not to have. He finds the policemen's "dissembling" most unbearable and admits his murder. Poe's tale has attracted the attention of numerous critics, who have discussed its various aspects through diversified approaches,

"properly handled" allegory "mak[es] its nearest approach to truth in a not obtrusive and therefore not unpleasant *appositeness*" (p. 583).

¹² The tale is in first-person narration and there is no explicit mentioning of the narrator's sex, but the narrator consistently refers to himself as a "madman." Gita Rajan argues that Poe's narrator may be female, but the argument is far from persuasive (see Rajan, "A Feminist Rereading of Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *Papers on Language and Literature*, 24 [1988], 295). Poe describes the murdering act as follows: "With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. [The old man] shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him" (Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn [New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984], p. 558; further references are to this edition and appear in the text). Rajan unconvincingly interprets the scene in this way: "In that one moment of possession, she becomes the aggressor; she even assumes a male sexual posture, forcing the old man to receive her, almost raping him" ("Feminist Rereading," p. 295).

especially psychoanalysis, since the mid twentieth century.¹³ I approach the tale from a different angle, one attempting to reveal a structurally unified dramatic irony that conveys a subtle moral.

In expounding his theory of the unity of effect, Poe stresses the importance of the *dénouement* of the literary work. The writer should have the *dénouement* constantly in view, and every plot “must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen” (Poe, “Philosophy of Composition,” p. 13).¹⁴ In view of this emphasis, a scrutiny of the ending of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is in order:

No doubt I now grew *very* pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was *a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It 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!—this I thought, and this I think. But

¹³ For examples of the psychoanalytic approach, see Marie Bonaparte, “Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Stories of Edgar Allan Poe,” in *Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1964), pp. 67–80; Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 189–90; John W. Canario, “The Dream in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” *English Language Notes*, 7 (1970), 194–97; Robert Con Davis, “Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression,” *MLN*, 98 (1983), 983–1,005; J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 132–34; and Brett Zimmerman, “‘Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia: Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” *Mosaic*, 25, no. 2 (1992), 39–48.

¹⁴ Poe puts much emphasis on this point in his 1842 review of *Twice-Told Tales* and “The Philosophy of Composition” (see in particular the review of *Twice-Told Tales*, p. 573; and “Philosophy of Composition,” p. 13).

anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!*—

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 559)

The most important factor that has led to the exposure of the crime is what the narrator-protagonist takes to be the policemen’s hypocrisy. He thinks himself to be in a very righteous position, calling the policemen “Villains!” and finding their “dissembling” most unbearable. But a scrutiny of the structural unity of the tale reveals that what we have here is in effect the dénouement of dramatic irony with a significant ethical dimension: the narrator-protagonist is the only hypocritical person in the tale, and it is his own dissimulation that leads to his ungrounded suspicion of the policemen’s dissemblance, which in turn leads to his downfall.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is characterized by the first-person narrator’s gloating over his own dissemblance. He begins to tell the eight-night murdering process with the topic sentence, “You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!” (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 555). The words “wisely,” “caution,” and “foresight” (referring partly to his well-prepared concealment of the corpse) all point to the narrator’s belief in his own cunning. Further, the term “dissimulation,” which functions to define the preceding words, more explicitly refers to his hypocrisy. After he makes up his mind to carry out the murder, the protagonist becomes “never kinder to the old man” and very “cunningly” spies on the sleeping old man without being detected (p. 555). At daybreak he would hypocritically go into the old man’s chamber, “calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night” (p. 556). When the police officers come to search the house after a neighbor reports hearing a shriek during the night, the protagonist dissemblingly bids the policemen “welcome” and invites them to “search—search *well*” (p. 558). In the dénoue-

ment there is a strong tension between the protagonist's dissemblance in trying to hide his crime and his intolerance of what he takes to be the policemen's dissemblance.

Now, the question arises: are the policemen in fact dissembling? To answer this question, I want to examine several passages from the beginning, middle, and end of the tale. The first passage is from the beginning:

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. 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. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 555)

The second passage occurs in the middle of the tale:

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses?—now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew *that* sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. . . .

. . . It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! . . . But the beating grew louder, louder! . . . In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. (pp. 557–58)

The final passage is from the end:

Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was *a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. . . . It grew louder—louder—*louder!* And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. (p. 559)

Many readers regard the narrator's claims for supernatural powers of hearing as evidence of his sheer madness. But attending to Poe's emphasis on the consistency among the beginning, middle, and end of a tale suggests that Poe wants us to take the over-acute hearing as a fantastic fictional fact.¹⁵ The first paragraph of the tale conveys the point that the protagonist's sense of hearing is inhumanly or superhumanly acute. This is echoed by the middle of the tale, which stresses the protagonist's "over acuteness of the senses," enabling him to hear the increasingly loud beating of the old man's heart.

After the protagonist has pulled the bed over the old man, his behavior lends credibility to his claim of hearing the old man's heart beating in two ways. First, his feeling satisfied and relaxed without being vexed by the heart beating rules out the possibility that he is hearing his own heart beating out of guilt or nervousness, a point that gains continuous textual support in what follows in the tale. Second, although one person's hearing another person's heart beating with a heavy bed in between sounds impossible in reality, the description of the protagonist's examining the corpse and placing his "hand" upon the heart to feel its pulsation is perfectly in keeping with our experiences of the world, and thus functions to make believable the preceding description of the protagonist's hearing the old man's heart beating. In other words, Poe ingeniously makes a fantastic fictional fact credible through related realistic details. This move paves the way for the crucial *dénouement*, in which the protagonist's hearing the beating of the old man's heart is repeated virtually verbatim, and in which the fact that the old man is dead (no matter now in heaven or in hell) echoes with the narrator's claim at the beginning of the tale: "I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell." In Poe's fantastic fictional world, for the man whose sense of hearing is "over acute," it seems to make no difference whether the sound is on earth or in heaven/hell.

It is interesting that critics readily accept Franz Kafka's

¹⁵ For the emphasis on the consistency in question, see in particular Poe, "Philosophy of Composition," p. 13; and Poe, 1842 review of *Twice-Told Tales*, p. 573.

fantastic transformation of the protagonist into a monstrous verminous bug in “Metamorphosis” (1915), as well as Poe’s fantastic fictional facts in some of his other tales.¹⁶ Yet some critics, as I noted above, have refused to accept that the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart” hears the (dead) old man’s heart beating—in Zimmerman’s words, “it would have been impossible for him to hear such a noise unless his ear were against the old man’s chest” (“Moral Insanity,” p. 40). These critics take the noise either as the sound of an insect in the wall;¹⁷ or as the beating heart of the protagonist himself, associated with his conscience or sense of guilt;¹⁸ or as a matter of the mad protagonist’s auditory hallucinations.¹⁹ But obviously, Poe’s fic-

¹⁶ For instance, at the dénouement of Poe’s “The Black Cat” (published in 1843, the same year as “The Tell-Tale Heart”), the murderer, in a triumphant mood in front of the policemen for having walled up the corpse in a projection without leaving any trace, raps upon the very spot; there comes unexpectedly the informing cry of the black cat from within the wall, which leads to the murderer’s arrest and hanging (see Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat,” in *Poetry and Tales*, pp. 597–606). This event is fantastic in the following ways: first, the murderer displaces the bricks in the projection in order to insert the corpse, and he very carefully walls the whole up again without being in the least aware of the cat’s being walled up together with the corpse; second, after having been walled up for three days by a plaster made of mortar, sand, and hair, the cat is not suffocated to death; and third, the cat keeps silent for three days and only cries out to inform the policemen of the murder. Equally fantastically, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), after having been buried for “seven or eight” days in a vault “at a great depth” underground with thin air and a metal door of “immense weight,” the female protagonist Madeline, who had been much weakened by malady and was almost laid up in bed before she was thought dead, rends the screwed coffin, breaks through the locked heavy metal door, and returns to the house, shocking her twin brother Roderick to death. Moreover, Roderick, whose senses are over-acute, can hear in the house his sister’s “feeble movements” in the coffin deep underground, and, more dramatically, Madeline in the vault deep underground can enact simultaneously what her brother’s friend is reading from the “Mad Trist” in the house (see Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” in *Poetry and Tales*, pp. 317–36).

¹⁷ See John E. Reilly, “The Lesser Death-Watch and ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” *American Transcendental Quarterly*, no. 2 (1969), 5–7.

¹⁸ See, for instance, B. D. Tucker, “Evil Eye: A Motive for Murder in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” in *Readings on the Short Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Hayley Mitchell Haugen (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2001), p. 115; Pamela J. Shelden, “‘True Originality’: Poe’s Manipulation of the Gothic Tradition,” *American Transcendental Quarterly*, no. 29, pt. 1 (1976), 77; Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1972), p. 227; and E. Arthur Robinson, “Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 19 (1965), 374.

¹⁹ See Zimmerman, “‘Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia,” pp. 40–41; and Elizabeth Phillips, “Mere Household Events: The Metaphysics of Mania,” in her *Edgar*

tional world defies real-life criteria, and the well-wrought structural unity of the tale suggests that the protagonist, with his “over acute” sense of hearing, is able to hear the dead man’s heart beating. It is significant that, in this fictional world, the “over acuteness of the senses,” which is a typical symptom of insanity in reality, is made to appear as a characteristic of sanity. As the narrator argues, based on a criterion that he apparently shares with his fictional addressee: “The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. 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. How, then, am I mad?” At the crucial *dénouement*, the protagonist’s process of hearing also seems to suggest his being sane in this aspect:

My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they [the policemen] sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct:—it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definitiveness—until, at length, I found that the noise was *not* within my ears.

No doubt I now grew *very* pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 559)

The protagonist’s rational realization that he “fancied a ringing in [his] ears,” his conscious effort “to get rid of” the fantasy, and his final discovery that the noise, which “continued and gained definitiveness,” was “*not* within [his] ears,” all point to his being “sane” in this aspect in this fictional world.

This description, which moves from the fancied ringing in the protagonist’s ears to the final discovery that the noise is external to his body, also rules out the possibility that the protagonist is hearing his own heart beating. Indeed, one does not need an over-acute sense of hearing in order to hear one’s own heart beating—one feels rather than hears the beating of one’s own heart. If Poe’s purpose were to suggest that what the protagonist hears is his own heart beating, then the above-quoted

Allan Poe: An American Imagination: Three Essays (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1979), pp. 128–30.

interaction among the beginning, middle, and end of the tale concerned with the protagonist's over-acute hearing would be not only unnecessary but also out of place. Besides, Poe's description of the narrator-protagonist does not suggest any trace of his conscience/guilt:

In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. . . .

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. . . . First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. . . .

. . . There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha! (p. 558)

The self-satisfying “smiled gaily,” “did not vex me,” and “ha! ha!” betray the narrator-protagonist's cold-bloodedness, and go against the interpretation that “guilt is a major theme of the tale” (Tucker, “Evil Eye,” p. 115). This narrator-protagonist is a man who is simply beyond the sense of guilt.²⁰ Moreover, this man, who at the beginning of the tale claims to have been “dreadfully nervous,”²¹ is “singularly at ease” in front of the policemen:

. . . they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled,—for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man,

²⁰ But he is not beyond self-pity: “I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart” (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 556). The expression “[I] pitied him” only shows the protagonist's self-pity, since he is not really pitying the old man—“although I chuckled at heart.”

²¹ His nervousness greatly contributes to the horror effect at the killing scene: “It [the alive old man's beating heart] grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror” (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 557).

I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search *well*. I led them, at length, to *his* chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them *here* to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My *manner* had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. (“Tell-Tale Heart,” pp. 558–59)

The contrast between the protagonist’s being “dreadfully nervous” as a rule and his being “singularly at ease” in front of the policemen ironically and dramatically underscores the point that he is absolutely beyond the sense of guilt. Thus, it further rules out the possibility that he is hearing his own heart beating out of guilt.

Now, a significant point to note is that even if the sound were a matter of the protagonist’s hearing his own heart beating associated with his conscience/guilt, or even if it were a matter of his insane auditory hallucinations, a crucial fact would remain unchanged: the sane policemen with normal hearing cannot hear the heart beating, and are therefore not dissembling. The narrator concludes that the policemen’s inability to hear the heart beating really cloaks a pretense that mocks his own horror. This ungrounded suspicion arises from his own hypocritical nature, and what he suspects the policemen to be doing to him is precisely what he has done to others:

To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he [the old man] not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea. . . .

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. . . . I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 556)

Later, when the policemen come to search the house, the narrator reports: “I smiled,—for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome” (p. 558). This can be compared to the narrator’s final pleadings:

They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew!*—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! (p. 559)

Precisely because the protagonist mocks the old man's horror and treats the policemen with hypocritical smiles, he suspects that the policemen are mocking his own horror and treating him with hypocritical smiles as well.

While the protagonist gloats over his own dissemblance and enjoys his mockery and hypocritical smiles at others, he finds the same behavior from others to be most intolerable (“I felt that I must scream or die!”). But what he finds most intolerable, in effect, is only his own immoral behavior unconsciously projected onto the policemen. His shriek “Villains! . . . dissemble no more!” constitutes an ironic self-accusation. This self-accusation, which is foregrounded as the only direct speech in the tale and which is given more prominence by paragraph division and the textual end-focus position, culminates the structurally unified dramatic irony: the protagonist, as the only hypocritical person who gloats over his dissemblance throughout, unconsciously projects his own dissemblance onto the policemen, and finds this projected dissemblance most unbearable. It is ironic that he sees this projected dissemblance as being immoral and intends to call it to a stop, but his shriek “Villains! . . . dissemble no more! I admit the deed!” only unconsciously calls to a stop his own dissemblance. The crucial *dénouement* turns the tale into one of self-condemnation, implicitly telling the reader how one's self-satisfying hypocrisy can lead to one's downfall.²² This

²² Poe takes a drastically different stance toward the protagonists' dissemblance in “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) and in “Hop-Frog” (1849), where the protagonists take revenge for unbearable insults by murdering without being punished. In these tales the murderers' dissemblance seems to be regarded by Poe as an applaudable device. This change in stance has to do with Poe's personal life—with his desire for revenge upon his two literary enemies. See Francis P. Dedmond, “‘The Cask of Amontillado’ and the War of the Literati,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 15 (1954), 137–46; Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, trans. John Rodker (1949; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1971), pp. 505–6; Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts,

moral, as conveyed through the ingenious structural design, is much subtler and goes far beyond the superficial “crime and legal-punishment” motif.

In discussing Poe’s morally oriented dramatic irony as based on structural unity, we cannot overlook the important function of the final sentence of the tale: “It is the beating of his hideous heart!” (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 559). This last sentence echoes the title, “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The protagonist thinks that he can get rid of the old man’s eye by murder, but he is pursued by the victim’s heart as a tool or symbol of revenge, a fantastic heart that dramatically starts beating again when the murderer is in a most confident, triumphant, and cheery mood.²³ The heart, by beating louder, deprives the cold-blooded and marble-hearted murderer of his after-murder ease in front of the policemen, making him increasingly irritated and horrified. The sound eventually renders the hypocritical murderer unable to bear his own self-satisfied hypocrisy, unconsciously projected onto the policemen, and results in his ironic self-exposure of the crime in front of the unsuspecting policemen. Indeed, from the very title to the final sentence, the whole story hinges on the structurally unified dramatic irony, which ingeniously conveys the subtle moral.

It is interesting that while Poe criticizes Hawthorne for using overly exquisite skill in “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836), he himself seems in “The Tell-Tale Heart” to have been too

1941), pp. 501–6; and Edgar Allan Poe, letter to Joseph M. Field, 15 June 1846, in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), II, 318–20.

²³ Usually, after hiding the corpse, a murderer, in fear of discovery, would try hard to prevent other people—especially policemen—from getting to the spot. But for the sake of creating dramatic irony, Poe depicts the murderer as stupidly inviting the policemen to sit in the very room where he hid the corpse, and as most stupidly sitting himself “upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim,” out of his enthusiastic confidence and “perfect triumph.” The stupidity arises from the protagonist’s self-satisfying hypocrisy, since it is essentially a matter of his gloating over his dissemblance. But he falls a victim to his own hypocrisy: his sitting upon the heart of the victim makes it very natural for him to be chased by the victim’s revengeful heart in this fantastic fictional world. It is significant that the murderer in “The Black Cat” is characterized by the same kind of stupidity out of the sense of triumph of his dissemblance, which leads to the exposure of his crime in front of the policemen and consequently to his capital punishment.

subtle in conveying the moral with a structurally unified dramatic irony, one that has so far escaped critical attention. But, of course, there are other reasons underlying the critical neglect. As discussed above, many critics take Poe's aestheticism as covering both poetry and prose fiction, and so they have overlooked the ethical dimension of the tale. When critics pay attention to the moral dimension of the tale, they tend to focus on the superficial and conventional moral "*Crime does not pay* or *The wages of sin is death*" (Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art," p. 285). Besides, many critics are led by the narrator's words to believe that he is giving his account of his own cunning and dissimulation only to prove that he is not mad.

In this vein, when critics find the narration problematic or unreliable, they only take it as an indication of the narrator's madness.²⁴ One critic, William Freedman, while paying attention to the protagonist's over-acuteness of hearing, perceives it as a matter of getting an excess of unwanted knowledge: "To see, to feel, to sense too much is to suffer the punishment of destructive knowledge. . . . The closing of the old man's eye and the silencing of the seemingly jeering detectives is the plotted equivalent of Poe's less lethal efforts to dim our own perception and weaken our assumptions about meaning and intent."²⁵ Along this line of thinking, it is not likely that one will notice the structurally unified dramatic irony, which implicitly conveys a very different moral. Another critic, Paul Witherington, tries to show how "the narrator seduces the listener by getting him to participate vicariously in the crime, an accomplice after the fact."²⁶ As for the ending, Witherington argues that here the reader is prompted to identify with the police officers and indeed to become one of the "Villains!" To Witherington the

²⁴ See, for instance, Robinson, "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" pp. 369–70; *Short Stories for Students, Volume 4: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories*, ed. Kathleen Wilson and Marie Lazzari (Detroit: Gale Research, 1998), pp. 345–47; Brett Zimmerman, "Frantic Forensic Oratory: Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *Style*, 35 (2001), 34–49; and Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), pp. 208–9.

²⁵ Freedman, *The Porous Sanctuary: Art and Anxiety in Poe's Short Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 102.

²⁶ Witherington, "The Accomplice in 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 22 (1985), 472.

reader is “a villain for wanting to listen to the recreation of a tale of horror, and he’s a naive hypocrite for imagining that he can do so with impunity” (“Accomplice in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’” p. 474). From this point of view, the protagonist is justifiably leveling a moral condemnation against the policemen and the reader. But in fact, Poe’s textual dynamics have implicitly turned the butt of the protagonist’s moral condemnation from the policemen to the protagonist himself.

The ethically oriented dramatic irony of “The Tell-Tale Heart” extends to the narrator’s “sanity defense,” which is closely related to the cultural context of the tale. While Poe subtly uses a unified structural design to turn the protagonist’s condemnation of the policemen into the protagonist’s unconscious self-condemnation, he likewise ingeniously resorts to contextual relations in order to turn the narrator’s defense of himself in the process of legal justice into the narrator’s unconscious self-conviction, which justifies the legal arrest at the crucial *dénouement*. The two aspects of the overall dramatic irony interact with and reinforce each other to put across Poe’s subtle moral.



In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the first-person narrator uses his narration in the service of self-defense:

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? . . . Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

. . . You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded. (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 555)

As the tale ends with the protagonist’s admitting his guilt to the policemen, critics tend to agree that this defense is made by the retrospective narrator in the process of legal justice. The narration, however, is less an effort to defend his innocence from a murder charge than an effort to prove that he is sane. Yet the narration betrays notable features of insanity. In order to account for the deviant direction of the defense, which goes

against conventional expectations, and to account for the contradiction between claimed sanity and actual insanity, it is necessary to look into the cultural context of Poe's tale.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" was produced in the context of the increasing controversy in the mid nineteenth century over the "insanity defense."²⁷ Before the end of the eighteenth century, the most common test of exculpatory insanity was the loss of reason and the "knowledge of good and evil."²⁸ As John Cleman writes, with "the equation between reason and the moral sense, any sign of rationality—such as appearing calm and reasonable in court, premeditating or planning the crime, or seeking to hide or avoid punishment—demonstrated the presence of an indivisible conscience and concomitant moral responsibility" ("Irresistible Impulses," p. 628).²⁹ To qualify for legal exemption, the defendant had to be, in the words of Judge Tracy in 1774, "a man that is totally deprived of his understanding and memory, and doth not know what he is doing, no more than an infant, than a brute, or a wild beast."³⁰

At the turn of the century, however, Benjamin Rush, the father of American psychiatry, distinguished the moral faculties from the intellectual faculties (represented by different areas in the brain) and developed a new theory of insanity—"moral derangement"—in which insanity was considered a disease affecting the moral faculties alone, without disordering the intellect.³¹ In the 1830s James Cowles Prichard further developed

²⁷ See Cleman, "Irresistible Impulses"; and Thomas Maeder, *Crime and Madness: The Origins and Evolution of the Insanity Defense* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

²⁸ See Cleman, "Irresistible Impulses," p. 628. See also Maeder, *Crime and Madness*, pp. 7–12.

²⁹ See also Maeder, *Crime and Madness*, pp. 9–12.

³⁰ Judge Tracy, *Rex v. Arnold*, 16 How. St. Tr. 695 (1724); quoted in Maeder, *Crime and Madness*, pp. 10–11.

³¹ See Benjamin Rush, *Two Essays on the Mind: An Enquiry into the Influence of Physical Causes upon the Moral Faculty, and on the Influence of Physical Causes in Promoting an Increase of the Strength and Activity of the Intellectual Faculties of Man* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1972). See also Isaac Ray, *A Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity* (1838), ed. Winfred Overholser (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1962); and Paige Matthey Bynum, "'Observe How Healthily—How Calmly I Can Tell You the Whole Story': Moral Insanity and Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *Literature and Science as Modes of Expression*, ed. Frederick Amrine (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p. 141.

and popularized the discussion, making what he called “moral insanity” the “focus of psychological studies and polemical arguments until replaced by the category of psychopathic personality at the end of the century.”³² The courts in the nineteenth century began to accept arguments for an exculpatory “moral insanity,” or partial insanity, and with the increasing use of the insanity defense for defendants who did not fit the common-sense image of insanity, the defense became an object of ridicule and led to the suspicion that it was undermining civil order.³³ Some judges believed “that moral insanity was, in Baron Rolfe’s words, ‘an extreme moral depravity not only perfectly consistent with legal responsibility, but such as legal responsibility is expressly invented to restrain’” (Bynum, “Observe How Healthily,” p. 144).³⁴ The claim of moral insanity also met serious opposition within the profession of psychiatry, and “by the late 1840s even some distinguished asylum superintendents began denying the existence of a ‘moral’ insanity” (Bynum, “Observe How Healthily,” p. 144). The public at that time “tended to suspect deception in defense pleas of insanity, and newspapers often fanned these feelings” (Bynum, “Observe How Healthily,” p. 144).

The asylum reforms of the period also “contributed to the public perception that to be acquitted on the basis of insanity was to avoid punishment” (Cleman, “Irresistible Impulses,” p. 625). Before the end of the eighteenth century, the insane were treated very much like criminals, subjected to similar confinement and corporal punishments.³⁵ As Cleman writes, “with the reforms, the insane were housed apart from criminals and, to some degree, treated with . . . compassion and care” (“Irresistible Impulses,” p. 625). Poe explicitly satirizes these reforms

³² Eric T. Carlson, “Introduction,” in Rush, *Two Essays on the Mind*, p. xi. See James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London: Gilbert and Piper, 1835); and Bynum, “Observe How Healthily,” pp. 142–44.

³³ See Maeder, *Crime and Madness*; and Cleman, “Irresistible Impulses,” pp. 625–27.

³⁴ Bynum quotes from “Baron Rolfe’s Charge to the Jury, in the case of the Boy Allnut, who was tried at the Central Criminal Court, for the Murder of his Grandfather, on the 15th Dec., 1847,” *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, 1 (1848), 214.

³⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988 [1965]), pp. 38–64.

in his tale “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1844), in which he depicts in a highly dramatic manner the adoption of the “soothing system” at the *Maison de Santé*, a system that frees the insane from all punishments and, in most cases, from confinement. But the lunatics in the *Maison de Santé* take over, imprison the keepers in underground cells, and treat them inhumanly until the lunatics are subdued again.³⁶

In “The Tell-Tale Heart” the narrator-protagonist displays typical symptoms of partial insanity or “moral insanity.”³⁷ On the one hand, he retains his rationality in “calmly” telling the story, premeditating the crime, cunningly carrying it out and trying to hide it; but on the other hand, he displays “dreadful” nervousness, the lack of a rational motive for killing (“[The old man] had never wronged me. He had never given me insult” [“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 555]), the irrational fear of the old man’s eye (which he regards as an “Evil Eye”), and the obsession with a queer idea (“It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night” [p. 555]).³⁸

³⁶ See Edgar Allan Poe, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” in *Poetry and Tales*, pp. 699–716.

³⁷ Elizabeth Phillips offers a detailed discussion of how the narrator-protagonist resembles homicidal maniacs (see “Mere Household Events,” pp. 128–30). Bynum tries to show that “Poe’s narrator in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ is a morally insane man” (“Observe How Healthily,” p. 141). My discussion differs from such previous discussions in that I try to explore why Poe turns “insanity defense” into the ironic “sanity defense” and precludes the issue of “moral insanity” from this fictional world by using rationality as the sole criterion for determining insanity. Compare Zimmerman, “‘Moral Insanity’ or Paranoid Schizophrenia.”

³⁸ Bynum notes that, according to Rush, “the insane were ‘for the most part easily terrified, or composed, by the eye of a man who possessed his reason’” (“Observe How Healthily,” p. 146; Bynum quotes from Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon Diseases of the Mind*, 4th ed. [Philadelphia: John Grigg, 1830], p. 173). But of course, Poe is very likely making use of the popular superstition of the “Evil Eye” to enhance the dramatic effect (see Erika Bourguignon, “Evil Eye,” in *Encyclopedia Americana*, ed. Mark Cummings, et al. [Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Incorporated, 1993]). Thomas Ollive Mabbott argues that Poe may even be suggesting that it is the old man’s eye that drives the narrator-protagonist mad (see *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols. [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1978], III, 789). Some analytical critics take the eye as the Symbolic Gaze of the Father, the sign of paternal surveillance or domination (see, for instance, Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, pp. 226–32; Davis, “Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression”; and Rajan, “Feminist Rereading”). When the protagonist’s act of murder is perceived

As for the relation between the “The Tell-Tale Heart” and the cultural context, three possibilities arise. First, the tale may be an implicit social satire, ridiculing the “insanity defense” through the unexpected, opposite, and ironic “sanity defense,” and denying the existence of “moral insanity” by using the loss of rationality as the sole criterion for establishing insanity. Second, it may simply be a reaction to the insanity defense controversy. While greatly increasing the dramatic effects by depicting a narrator-protagonist who appears to be partially insane, Poe, faced with the social controversy, uses the ironic “sanity defense” and precludes the issue of “moral insanity” in order to convey the ethical lesson in question and to prevent readers from absolving the protagonist of his guilt and treating him with compassion and pity. A third and most likely possibility is that Poe is purposefully making use of the social controversy in order to extend the ethically oriented dramatic irony. Closely linked with the structurally unified dramatic irony culminating in the protagonist’s unconscious self-condemnation, the narrator’s assertion in that cultural context that he is sane amounts to an unconscious self-conviction. Indeed, Poe seems to make the protagonist’s unconscious self-condemnation and the narrator’s unconscious self-conviction reinforce each other in order to convey the implicit moral in a highly dramatic and ironic manner.

Moreover, Poe makes the narrator-protagonist suffer from the same kind of horror that he subjects the old man to:

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. (“Tell-Tale Heart,” p. 556)

By victimizing the old man with horror, the narrator-protagonist is ironically victimizing himself—since the narrator-protagonist is in police custody, his horror is likely to be linked up with

as a justifiable act of resistance or rebellion against paternal domination, the authorial dramatic irony directed against the protagonist would naturally remain unseen.

his impending death penalty for murder (if he is legally convicted). By subjecting this apparently morally insane man to legal arrest at the crucial dénouement, Poe seems to subscribe to the view of nineteenth-century judges that moral insanity is “an extreme moral depravity not only perfectly consistent with legal responsibility, but such as legal responsibility is expressly invented to restrain.”

For over one and a half centuries, critics have neglected Poe’s distinction between the aesthetic structural design and the non-aesthetic subject matter of prose narrative. It is high time to revisit Poe’s relevant critical essays and to see that Poe’s aesthetic conception of the subject matter of poetry is, in effect, due to poetry’s peculiar generic characteristics, which are not shared by prose fiction. According to Poe, while poetry is only fit for conveying Beauty, prose fiction is suitable for conveying a wide range of modes of thought that are “antagonistical” to Beauty and are based on the ethically related though not ethically confined “Truth.” The clarification of this point paves the way for an ethical investigation of Poe’s tales, such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” that are marked by ethical concerns. Poe’s ethical concerns, however, are inseparable from the aesthetic “unity of effect,” and therefore may appear very subtle. Primarily because of this subtlety, the implicit moral conveyed in “The Tell-Tale Heart” through the structurally unified dramatic irony has escaped previous critical attention. Moreover, the way in which the subtle moral is expressed may be connected in various ways with the cultural context. In the case of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” an investigation of how the tale reacts to the insanity debate in the mid nineteenth century and how the contextual reaction is linked with the structurally unified moral is crucial to puzzling out the ironic “sanity defense” by an apparently insane man, a defense that involves the implicit preclusion of the issue of “moral insanity.” A comprehensive view of Poe’s non-aesthetic conception of the tale’s subject matter, structurally unified thematic import, and relevant cultural context may enable us to gain a fresh understanding not only of “The Tell-Tale Heart” but also of Poe’s other prose narratives.

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ABSTRACT

“Edgar Allan Poe’s Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” (pp. 321–345)

For over one hundred years, critics have widely regarded Edgar Allan Poe as an aesthete of literature as a whole, which has to a great extent oriented the interpretation of his prose narratives. In this essay I revisit Poe’s relevant essays and reveal that Poe’s aesthetic conception of the subject matter of poetry is due to poetry’s peculiar generic characteristics not shared by prose fiction. Poe makes an unequivocal distinction in prose fiction between structural design and subject matter. While putting the tale’s structural design completely on a par with that of poetry, Poe treats the tale’s subject matter as different in nature from that of poetry—as “antagonistical” to Beauty and often based on the ethically related, though not ethically confined, “Truth.” In this essay I argue that if some of Poe’s tales convey a moral, then that moral tends to be implicit and inseparable from the structural “unity of effect,” and the tale may react or respond to the cultural context in a certain way. In Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” we can see a characteristic interaction among a structurally unified dramatic irony, an implicit moral, and the historical “insanity defense” controversy.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; “The Tell-Tale Heart”; implicit moral; structurally unified dramatic irony; insanity debate