



Research Paper

A Study of the Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe as a Writerly Text

Richa Sarma

Department of English
University of Science and Technology Meghalaya

ABSTRACT: *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a famous American short story composed in ten paragraphs, written by Edgar Allan Poe. This article attempts to study the nature of the text on the basis of the French scholar, Roland Barthes's theory of Readerly and Writerly text which appeared in his work *S/Z*. The particular story of a supposedly insane person, whose gender and identity are not revealed, kills an old man as narrated by the person for the eye of the old man which irritated the narrator, is a highly mysterious tale which is giving the readers enough scope to question on their active or passive participation in interpreting the text. The primary question that occurs here is that if readers should believe in what is already written by the author or if there are spaces in the story which are to be filled in through re-writing by the readers. This article aims to provide a convincing answer to the questions related to multiple interpretations of the text by understanding the nature of the text by referring to Roland Barthes's theory on text.

KEYWORDS: *Writerly Text, Barthes, Multiple Interpretations, insanity, American short story.*

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I. ARTICLE:

Edgar Allan Poe is a very important name associated with the American Romantic Movement. As the movement was primarily founded on the idea of imagination and individuality, therefore the works of Edgar Allan Poe finely reflected his imaginative adroitness. Poe's short stories are marked with macabre of killings. In a research report *The Question of Poe's Narrator's* by James W. Garagno, Poe is classified as '*not merely a Romanticist, he is also a chronicler of the consequences of the Romantic excesses which lead to psychic disorder, pain and disintegration.*' (1963:178) His famous work *The Tell-Tale Heart* strongly showcases the power of imagination in creating a twisted psychological murder mystery.

The Tell-Tale Heart is a short story written in a unique narrative style. The whole story is composed of a single narrative voice. The narrator claims to be mentally sound and tries to dismiss any claims on his or her insanity by others. However, as the story progresses, it successfully drops many hints on the narrator's insanity. Actually the narrator's trials to prove his sanity contribute more to intensify the idea of his madness. The unnamed narrator is not provided any gender identity, who elucidates how the person has killed an old man because that old man *had* the eye of a vulture which seemed evil to the narrator.

Though the story has taken psychological facet as its foundation, yet there are other aspects of the stories which are too significant to ignore. Most importantly, the short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* is such a text which raises multiple questions among the readers. It invites numerous interpretations at different points of the text.

Roland Barthes, the French critic and philosopher has already categorized the texts on the basis of their quality of being *rewritten*. In Roland Barthes' work *S/Z*, Barthes has analyzed the French novella *Sarrasine* in structural approach and went beyond it by dealing not only with the Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of sign, signifier and signified but also with the significance of narratology in judging the nature of a text. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes opines that on the basis of 'practice is that of writing' a 'basic typology of a text' can be established. He has broadly categorized the text as 'Readerly' and 'Writerly' text. Readerly texts are those which do not offer the scope of *rewriting* by the readers. It is called a *countervalue* to the Writerly texts which welcome active participation of readers in producing the text and not just consuming it. The concept of writerly text is a reaction against the singular system which according to Roland Barthes minimizes the spaces through

which a reader can enter into the text to rewrite it. Therefore a writerly text can be understood as a text which is composed of infinite signifiers with no determined number of signified. It implies that a text can be called Writerly if there are no fixed numbers of interpretations already decided by the author. To make the difference of the texts more distinct, Roland Barthes has also clarified what he meant by interpretation. Interpretation, according to Barthes is not the simple meaning giving process to a text. However it is the way of acknowledging the *plural* approaches the text has.

The Tell-Tale Heart, by Edgar Allan Poe can be discussed as a text which is definitely not confined to a single interpretation. In Poe's essay, *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe mentions that a refrain sometimes becomes a burden in a work as it might be producing the same thought in its every use. He defends his own works saying that he is determined enough to use the *unvaried* refrain to produce *continuously novel effects* and his short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* proves his statement to be true. In the story, the refrain "I am mad?" is used three times however every time the refrain is applied, it can be associated with multiple effects. As the story begins, the unnamed narrator asks that why the narrator is considered to be a mad person when the person is just ill. Here the readers have multiple choices while producing the meaning of the refrain "am I mad?" such as a reader can directly believe in what the narrator is saying by assuming that the person is falsely framed to be an insane person or else there is the scope of doubting the narrator when the narrator adds that the narrator's senses are stronger than ever that the person can even hear voices from heaven and hell. This exaggeration compels the readers to think that the narrator is actually mad. However, the text does not demand to cease our production of meaning here. A reader can go beyond these two assumptions and can come up with the idea that there is no one questioning the narrator and the narrator is explaining everything to self, as the narrator is insane. In the same way in the second use of the refrain, which is used by the narrator while defending own mental health by narrating how minutely the murder was plotted, a reader can again *rewrite* the text with ideas such as - the narrator has not waited for seven days to kill the old man (as narrated) but the person is not sane enough to recount how much time the person has taken to kill the old man, or the narrator might have actually waited for seven days and tried to become more friendly to his target, the old man to kill the him, which again gives the space to the readers to ask if the narrator was really mad or a cold blooded criminal with proper planning and plotting, or else the question of disbelief again occurs here if the narrator has actually killed someone. As the author, Edgar Allan Poe has not given any clue about a listener in the story so there is always the space where we can *write* that no one has ever questioned the narrator regarding any murder or insanity. The last use of the refrain reflects that the narrator is again attempting to prove his or her sanity by the rhetorical question "I am mad?" and explains how carefully the narrator has disposed the dead body of the old man. This refrain again provides different effects. It makes the reader to produce the meaning of the text and not just to consume it. A reader again can believe the narrator, or disbelieve the narrator or go beyond to infinite interpretations. As the third refrain appears almost by the end of the story, therefore the readers can now see the whole picture with a lot of entrances to enter into it. On the one hand, it can be interpreted that the narrator was actually mad and for which he or she had confessed everything easily without any external force put by police or an investigating officer. On the other hand, one cannot deny the possibility of doubting the narrator to be actually a very sharp killer who was pretending to be insane so that he or she could escape the legal consequences of the murder as three police officers already arrived at the apartment as informed by the neighbors (who claimed to hear old man screaming). However, the space for multiple interpretations does not fill here. A reader can obviously *produce* a different meaning here by believing that actually there was no dead body under the floor boards and the insanity of the narrator has led him or her to experience a hallucination of the whole murder incident. The scream which was heard by the neighbors here could be the scream of the narrator which came out while hallucinating. However this assumption brings a question to *gender neutrality* of the narrator.

The concept of *neutral* is also defined by Roland Barthes in his lecture in 1976 at the College de France. *Le Nature or The Neutral* is the title of the book which was composed of his lecture in which he dealt with the idea of *neutral*. He elucidated the concept as 'every inflection that, dodging or baffling the paradigmatic, oppositional structure of meaning, aims at the suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse'. It indicates the subjects which are not confined to binary rules. Though Barthes had never connected this idea with gender or sexuality but he had never denied the connection as well. When looking at the short story, *The Tell-Tale Heart* by the lenses of Roland Barthes, his concept of *neutral* can be put to understand the character of the unnamed narrator. It gives light to another entrance to the text and contributes to claiming it a *writerly text*. The narrator in the story is neither given a name nor a third person pronoun. The gender of the narrator is hidden and it frees the character from the conventional sets of binary of gender. It opens the scope for the readers to understand the story from the perspective of a male character or a female character or else from the point of third gender as well. Readers now have the choice to provide identity to the character of the narrator and by this they are *rewriting* the text.

Another interpretation of the story can be considered in which the unnamed narrator is believed to be a symbolic character. Edgar Allan Poe is already considered as one among the symbolists by Charles Feidelson,

Jr. in his book, *Symbolism and American Literature*. While commenting on symbolism, Charles Feidelson says “*the unified phrase of American Literature which began with the tales of Hawthorne and Poe and ended with Melville and Whitman was not recognized as such by the men who made it. Certainly none would have described it as a symbolist movement; indeed, none would have called him a symbolist. Yet today the family likeness can be discerned, and the pattern is that of symbolism.*” (1983) While reading the short story *The Tell Tale Heart* in the light of symbolism, the unnamed narrator can be seen as a character *which represents a concept or theme larger than themselves*, as defined in the article ‘Writing 101: All the Different Types of Characters in Literature’ available online. As the narrator here is free from any identity, therefore it is a character with high probability to represent any person or group of people from any time and place. The character might be seen as a representation of those who believe in the dangers of evil eye. Evil eye is a very common notion present among various cultures. Though the superstitious belief of evil eye has its origin in Greek history, it is widely accepted in the world. The belief is that a person can cause much loss to another person in numerous aspects of life by his or her evil glare. The same belief is seen in the story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, where the narrator plans to kill the old man for his evil eyes though the old man was actually loved by the narrator. Basically the central character showcases the unfit mental health of the people who believe in superstitions. In this way a reader can also categorize the story as one among the symbolic fictions.

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