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## A LITERARY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TWO SHORT STORIES AUTHORED BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to look at two short stories, one from the genre of gothic horror, while the other one is a psychological thriller, both written by Edgar Allan Poe in the years of 1942 and 1943, and analyze the stories from a literary as well as psychological point of view. Through the course of the paper it will become evident that Poe used literature to bring out major themes about the human condition.

These stories are titled "The Masque of Red Death" and the "Tell Tale Heart."

The relevant materials used to draw up the psychological write up are the Freudian personality psychoanalysis tools and 5th edition of the DSM-V by the American Psychological Association.

Apart from exposing some typical symbols and literary techniques that Poe used to make this writing more effective, the paper also aims to examine primarily Poe's active inculcation of psychological themes into his narratives, and secondarily the underlying mental issues that his characters could have possible been diagnosed with (which may or may not be a reflection of Poe's own state).

KEYWORDS: Psychology, symbol, Edgar Allan Poe, Bipolarity, Gothic, Thriller.

Poe's early life was characterized by the tumultuous loss of his mother to tuberculosis and then the death of his foster parent both at young ages, in addition to this generally unhappy early family life, he lost his wife to tuberculosis again at an older age.

Poe eventually succumbed to alcoholism, suspected undiagnosed bipolar disorder and depression and faced severe problems with aggression and gambling as described by his co-workers.<sup>1</sup>

Poe's work was largely based on exploring the depths of the human mind, especially the darker

and more primal parts of man's behavior. His personas often demonstrate primitive drives of uncontrolled aggression and "perverseness" along with many other symptoms that are consistent across his stories during the period from 1842-1843 which will be examined in this paper.

These aforementioned symptoms are indicative of numerous psychological disorders that his personas may possess, which could in part be extrapolated to Poe's own mental state at the time of writing.

This paper will aim to analyze literary trends and thereby conduct a psychological analysis of the persona in Poe's short stories using DSM-V and other psychological constructs as a reference. Poe was mainly known for his psychological thrillers and his gothic horror stories.

<sup>1</sup><http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/neuroskeptic/2012/10/23/the-psychology-of-edgar-allan-poe/#.WXIkjYiGPb0>

The intention of this article to literarily and psychologically analyze one story in each of these categories in a novel manner. The horror story that will be analyzed is "The Masque of the Red Death" while the psychological thriller is "The Tell-Tale Heart."

### SUMMARIES

Before beginning the analysis of the three stories, a summary is in order to provide a general background of the type of work that Poe was representative of. The Masque of Red Death<sup>2</sup> focuses on Prince Prospero, a rich and superfluous man, who gathers a thousand of his closest comrades and men to live a lavish and isolated life inside his extravagant abbey to escape the touch of the "Red Death" which was a fatal plague that ran rampant in his country. In the midst of the party, however, a dark masked figure puts a hush to the festivities and much to the dismay of the Duke, this figure happens to be the "Red Death" itself. The story ends with the death of Prince Prospero by the Red Death who is said to hold "illimitable dominion over all."

The Tell- Tale Heart<sup>3</sup> begins with the persona describing a man who appears to be living in the same house as he is. Although it is unclear what exactly the relationship between the two individuals is, it is clear that the persona has a vendetta for the vulture eye of the subject. The story appears to be a quest that the narrator goes on to clarify exactly why he is not insane, when in fact the image that comes across is exactly that of an insane person. The speaker spends hours on end watching the victim sleep at night, and on the eighth such night after the persona's hand slips off the lamp he was holding, he makes the decision to kill the victim and hide his dismembered corpse under floorboards.

When the police come inspecting after hearing cries from the house, the persona starts hallucinating the sounds of the dead man's beating heart. The noise eventually gets so loud and persistent that the narrator is driven insane and

confesses the murder. These stories are different in multiple respects but do share common psychological ground which will become relevant at the end of the paper.

### ANALYSIS

The earlier of the two stories was the Masque of Red Death, composed by Poe in early 1942. One of the major themes in this story is the inevitability of death, with the entire story being an allegory for the same. We also see Poe's obsession with the idea of life and the progression of it through the main literary symbol of the rooms in this narrative.

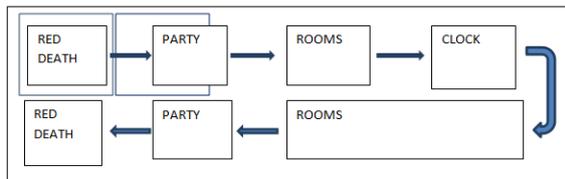
The rooms in the abbey are described to start with lighter and optimistic colors such as blue, purple and green in the East, quite literally symbolizing the early "dawn" of life. Towards the west, the colors transform into white, violet and finally black velvet symbolizing the transition into old age and death.

This symbol somewhere foreshadows the manner in which the positivity and innocence of the party will eventually take a darker turn and end in death. The panes in the last chamber are described to be of "deep blood color" which speaks about Prospero's gory association with the end of life. The next obvious symbol in this piece is the clock which is described to have "a dull, heavy, monotonous clang" which brings "a brief disconcert" in the festivities occurring. The effect of the clock is that it causes even the "giddiest" to grow pale, and causes a "confused revery and meditation" in the minds of the aged. Here again, we witness Poe making an effective comment on the impact of time (quite literally) on individuals. Somewhere his words convey suddenness and surprise experienced by humans with each step of aging that occurs. The story even goes on to dialogue that the masses "whispered vows to each other" that with the next chiming they would no longer show that taken aback sentiment. This further satirizes the tendencies and desire of humanity to age gracefully if so, rather than become a mockery in their social circle's expectations. Through this single metaphor, Poe expertly digs out a seemingly small yet true aspect of our psychology and presents it rather intrinsically to his readers. Another interesting pattern observed

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.public.asu.edu/~cajsa/eng200\\_fall07/The%20Masque%20of%20the%20Red%20Death.pdf](http://www.public.asu.edu/~cajsa/eng200_fall07/The%20Masque%20of%20the%20Red%20Death.pdf)

<sup>3</sup><http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/telltale.html>

in the Masque of Red Death is the pattern of narration that Poe follows. He starts by talking about the red death and the presentation of the same, after which he goes on the party, then the rooms, then the clock, then the rooms and then the clock, coming back to the party and then ending with the red death again. This can be diagrammatically presented like so-



This unique literary structure places a metaphorical parenthesis of the red death on either side of the events and simultaneous occurrences which somewhere suggests that death is inevitable and is an inevitable part of any series. The fact that the clock is placed in the center of the literary plot palindrome also reiterates the theme of "time" in this narrative wherein Poe is plausibly trying to communicate how society is so wrapped up in trying to hide the effect that time has had on an individual that people forget how powerful the entity really is. By placing the clock in the center of the plot, the author could also be suggesting the prominence of mortality as a theme in the story. There is also a stark element of the supernatural in The Masque of the Red Death, be it the mysterious and darker connotation of the fact that there were 7 rooms which could be representative of the 7 deadly sins or the bodiless cloak that was the Red death. This eerie atmosphere, when added to the story, makes it one of the hallmarks of gothic literature. Additionally, an interesting opening to the story that starts with the symptoms of the Red Death can be closely found to correlate with the symptoms of certain forms of tuberculosis (which has already been established to be a large part of the illness that Poe had witnessed in his life). It is mentioned that the "Red Death had long devastated the country" which could be a reference to the proliferation of pulmonary tuberculosis at the time. The continual reference to blood, dizziness and sharp pains resonates strongly with the clinical presentation of tuberculosis which includes chest pains, weakness, fatigue and coughing up of blood.

Speaking from a psychological point of view the description of Prince Prospero is in line typical Poe style as the former's sanity is brought up as an issue and then defended. The narrator says that the tastes of the Duke were regarded as peculiar and that "there (were) some who would have thought him mad," but goes on to defend the character by saying that he was just a "bold and fiery person... with barbaric lustre" who "disregarded the decora of mere fashion. This insanity defense as we may go on to call it is a motif in Poe's work, as apparent madness is disguised as a form of brilliant eccentricity which could signal some sort of denial on part of the persona. In this story, Poe also exposes the typical response of the human condition in the times of adversity and turmoil which is the "run and hide approach". Written in a period during the second world war, after the United States had seen the worst of economic downfalls it is common knowledge that the society was well split between the middle class, ruined by way of the war and the higher classes who continued to exploit their resources and live a good life, with major fashion trends and movies such as Casablanca that were all the rage.<sup>4,5</sup>The manner in which a thousand elite members of the Duke's class isolated themselves from the distress of the common man could very well be Poe commenting on the social psychology of the time.

A study guide to Edgar Allan Poe authored by Gale, Cengage Learning provides another very interesting perspective on the Masque of Red Death which suggests that the entire tale could be the internal monologue of a madman wherein each and every <sup>6</sup> character from the Red death, to the participants of the masquerade were extensions of the persona's very own psyche.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.690kcee.com/nostalgia-lounge/life-in-the-40/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-and-education-magazines/everyday-life-1929-1941>

<sup>6</sup>[https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ImKqCgAAQB AJ&pg=PT14&lpg=PT14&dq=Interior+monologue+in+Poe%27s+stories&source=bl&ots=mtY3Pmr77B&sig=\\_XFJAMczNalya0pYPzp8jAchrK8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj44oPD\\_qTVAhWHL08KHc4dCzkQ6AEIQ DAF#v=onepage&q=Interior%20monologue%20in%20Poe's%20stories&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ImKqCgAAQB AJ&pg=PT14&lpg=PT14&dq=Interior+monologue+in+Poe%27s+stories&source=bl&ots=mtY3Pmr77B&sig=_XFJAMczNalya0pYPzp8jAchrK8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj44oPD_qTVAhWHL08KHc4dCzkQ6AEIQ DAF#v=onepage&q=Interior%20monologue%20in%20Poe's%20stories&f=false)

This conclusion could be drawn through the use of certain dreamlike language used by the narrator wherein he describes the crowds as “phantasms” as well as the manner in which as soon as Prospero collapses, the red death collapses into an intangible form as well – suggesting that the entire story could have all been but a figment of imagination on part of the Duke, the persona, or even both (given that they’re the same entity).

The Tell- Tale heart adorns a more psychological form of horror than the masque of red death. Published first in 1943, this tale takes on a different narrative approach wherein the persona focuses more on his own thoughts and actions rather than that of a bystander (as in the previous story.) One of the interesting features of this story is the large amount of unknowns that the readers are pushed to question. Multiple doubts are raised such as “where is the incident occurring?” “what is the relationship between the old man and the narrator?” “why did the persona relentlessly stalk the old man instead of killing him outright?” “why did the vulture eye cause such a frustration for the antagonist?” and so on. These unanswered questions add a certain air of mystery to the story which is an archetype of gothic fiction.<sup>7</sup> A majority of the story focuses on the events that occur during the “eighth night” and Poe uses vivid descriptions, going into very deep detail regarding every movement and every thought that occurs in the scene, which adds to the overall tense atmosphere being built up. The consistent shift between the description of the scene and the narrator’s thoughts also make his voice come across as much more scheming and malicious.

This is further emphasized by the plethora of rhetorical questions that the speaker seems to be asking the readers such as “What could I do?” and “How then am I mad?” It is almost as though Poe asks us these questions to somewhere get us as readers involved into the psychological thriller to create maximum effect by personalization. As in true Poe fashion, the story has its own major symbols as well. The first symbol is the “vulture eye”

of the victim, also referred to as “the evil eye” which makes the narrator’s blood run cold. The word “vulture” suggests some sort of scavenging activity as well as intrusion of personal space which could explain the narrator’s motives, while the term “evil eye” could even suggest that the old man was not a real individual but a symbol for the supernatural possession and the haunted state of the narrator’s house and mind – an intrusion of a more metaphorical nature could be referenced here. The common notion that the eyes are a window into the soul could also be considered in this particular scenario wherein the nefarious nature of the eye could be a symbol of the wicked soul of the old man, despite his descriptively positive demeanor that Poe appears to be in awe of. The next symbol, of course, is the heart itself which beats its way into confession of crime. Here the heart is a physical representation of the loud voice of the human conscience that exists even though its owner is dead. This perhaps is Poe’s way of exposing the moral theme of “truth will out” by introducing a part of human sub consciousness. With regards to the heart, another interesting feature is that as the beating in the story grows more intense and regular, somewhere the reader is forced to experience the same nervousness and anxiety as the repetition of words such as “louder every moment” and “I thought the heart might burst” certainly quicken the pace of the narrative and add tension to the story. The last literary feature of this story to touch upon is the use of sensory imagery. As previously discussed, the loud and continual beating of the heart creates sharp auditory imagery, the use of adjective heavy speech such as “a pale blue eye, with a film over it” and “black and pitch with the thick darkness,” creates clear visuals for the readers and allows the engagement of sight, the use of phrases such as “the man sprang up” and “stealthily... stealthily” create kinesthetic imagery. All this, of course, in addition to the description of the sound of beating heart which allows the readers to involve their auditory perception as well. The involvement of the reader’s senses on part of the author allows a stronger effect and resonant impact to be created by the story, which leaves the audience with not only the

<sup>7</sup><https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-motifs>

message of the story but also the horror that is characteristic of gothic fiction. From a psychological perspective, the Tell-Tale Heart uncovers a lot more than does the Masque of Red Death. The first thing to notice is the opening sentence of the story which reads "Nervous- very very dreadfully nervous I had been and am..." This repeated restlessness on part of the persona could be layman's terminology for feelings of anxiety. Apart from this symptom, many other activities of the persona are rather peculiar such as his over enthusiastic sanity defense as in lines "How then am I mad," "You fancy me mad... but you should have seen me" and "if you think me mad, you will think so no longer." The narrator appears to be so caught up in his own eccentricities and actions that he makes it his priority to overtly convince the readers that he is not mad, but ironically in doing so convinces the readers of just the opposite. It severely appears as though the persona is well aware that he is facing some sort of psychological instability, but is in a state of classic denial. The next symptom of course is the fact that the persona can hear the relentless beating of the heart of a man before and more troublingly after his death. This is a sign of hypersensitivity or auditory hallucinations.<sup>8</sup> An additional psychological question raised is about instinct.

The speaker in the story appears to have admiration and love for the "old man" but is pushed to the degree of murder merely by the frustration caused by the vulture eye, which seems very instinctive and overly aggressive. There are also several signs of mania and boasting self-praise as the persona prides his own intricate stalking, murder, and hiding of the old man's corpse. The narrator uses phrases such as "I could barely contain my feelings of triumph," "I chuckled at heart" and "I then smiled gaily to find the deed so far done." The persona also appears to be enthralled by the manner in which he has power over his victim and gives himself sadistic applause by musing on all the horror filled thoughts the old man might have been thinking at the time. Using all these symptoms if we were to consider the

<sup>8</sup><https://psicovalero.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/dsm-v-manual-diagnc3b3stico-y-estadc3adstico-de-los-trastornos-mentales.pdf>

5<sup>th</sup> edition of the DSM-V manual of psychological diagnosis most of them fall into the schizophrenic spectrum of disorders. Considering section 295.90 (F20.9) under diagnostic criteria for Bipolar Disorders, it is possible the persona was undergoing a manic episode characterized by "increased goal-directed activity or energy," "increased self-esteem and grandiosity" "talkativeness," racing thoughts and most obviously excessive involvement in high consequence activities with additional euphoria. Since this story occurs over a period of more than 8 days, the episode could effectively be classified as either a manic or even a hypomanic episode if more information had been given about the proceedings of each day. There is a specificity to be made here that the bipolarity is not the depressive kind as the persona shows no such symptoms, however there are symptoms of anxious distress and mood incongruent psychotic disorder primarily due to the extreme self-appreciation and triumph the persona feels upon the murder of the man which should ideally be accompanied with negative sentiments, and the manner in which he is able to hide the same from the police in the initial stages of the investigation with self-acclaim. Towards the end of the story however, the auditory hallucination is a representation of internal guilt on part of the persona which is a sign of mood congruent hallucination.

So somewhere it can be generalized that the behavior is mood incongruent while the hallucinations are mood congruent. Poe effectively demonstrates the darker parts of the human psychology that overrule meticulous and rational planning as well. Keeping in mind the Freudian principles of psychoanalysis it can also be inferred that somewhere the three elements of human psychology (the id, superego, and ego) are at war in the case of the persona, because the character seems torn between the triumph of killing the old man and the guilt of realizing the immorality of the action condoned by free will.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>[http://iblog.stjschool.org/stories/files/2011/09/The\\_TellTale\\_Heart\\_eNotes.pdf](http://iblog.stjschool.org/stories/files/2011/09/The_TellTale_Heart_eNotes.pdf)

## CONCLUSION

All in all, just by considering these two short stories, it is evident that Poe is truly a prolific writer with the innate ability to make his stories reach out of the paper and effectively play with the mind of his readers. He also comments on such profound and innate psychological phenomena, that it leaves the target audience with a deep impact but also a bit of thrill as is the purpose.

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