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ENGL 3240

October 30, 2017

“The Tell-Tale Heart”: A Reflection of the Insanity Defense

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an American writer who undoubtedly incited some terror into the heart of his reader. Poe’s gothic tales with thrilling psychological effects induce gasps at every shocking moment. One is left to ponder the inspiration for Poe’s gothic poems and stories. Poe’s legacy, perhaps unsurprisingly, left the notion that he was a madman. Poe wrote in terms of social and political events he knew well. Writers are inherently influenced by the world they reside in, and Poe was not immune to this influence. He utilized events that happened during his life to inspire his creative writing. Poe used his short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” as commentary on the M’Naghten insanity defense introduced in 1843, and one should analyze the story as being told through a potential insanity defense criminal to a psychiatrist.

The M’Naghten case was a profound enlightenment in the realm of judicial and psychological fields. People are aware that “[t]he law has long recognized that criminal punishment is not appropriate for those who, by reason of insanity, cannot tell right from wrong,” but many are not aware of when this fundamental right changed through law (Shoptaw 1103). Prior to 1843, laws established in England and the United States were largely framed upon the moral and religious aspects of good and evil. A person received punishment based on the idea of whether behavior enacted was from being a good person or an evil person, and the notion had been coined as the wild-beast test. The M’Naghten Test caused this motion for change in 1843, and the new thought of law became whether a person knew right from wrong,

thus introducing the original establishment of the insanity defense in England and spreading to the courts of the United States.

The gray area brought about by the M’Naghten Test was of what exactly it meant for a person to have knowledge of whether their act was right or wrong. It is this notion of right, wrong, and the gray area that inspired Poe in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” As the French poet Charles Baudelaire stated of Poe, “[he was] a writer outside his society who reflected the derangement of a hypocritical country that professed individual freedom,” and a story over potentially getting away with murder through an insanity plea is quite a highlighting point of the hypocrisy of individual freedom (Charters 761). Those who pleaded insanity as a defense were viewed as benefiting from their crimes, because during this time of reforming the judicial thoughts on insanity, a reformation was being made to treat insane patients separately from other criminals in prison. Shen notes, “Poe explicitly satirizes these reforms. . . In “The Tell-Tale Heart” the narrator-protagonist displays typical symptoms of partial insanity or moral insanity. . . [and] may be an implicit social satire, ridiculing the insanity defense,” and Poe is attempting to inspire his reader to reflect on the social and ethical controversy surrounding the insanity defense (341-343). As Tally further concludes of Poe’s work, “Poe’s blend of horror and satire makes possible a subtle critique” of the nation during a time when writers were establishing national identity and narratives (Tally 49).

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is undoubtedly a narrative of murder, and can even be viewed as premeditated murder, but the focus is on whether the murderer is insane and can plead the insanity defense. The reader is immediately brought into the story with dialogue between the potentially insane criminal and a psychiatrist. The notion of the tale being based on a character

trying to plead the insanity defense can be proven by the murderer addressing a question that has been asked prior to the story's beginning. The narrator declares:

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. (Poe 767)

The narrator stated the ability to hear heaven and earth as Poe's commentary of the previous judicial rule that a person behaved through means inspired by good or evil. The M'Naghten Test created the insanity defense for behavior enacted by an individual who could not decipher between right and wrong. The ability to recant the story calmly does not prove or disprove an insanity defense, for it is the essence of the whole story that establishes whether the actions were performed by an insane individual.

The narrator appears as an insane individual in the paragraph immediately following the aforementioned scene. The reader is made privy to the compulsion and obsession held by the narrator. The narrator can only think of the old man under their care constantly, because the obsession with the old man's injured eye had become all-consuming. The narrator then declares, "I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (Poe 767). The premeditation for murder has been brought forth. The ruling of the M'Naghten Test means that premeditated murder does not matter if the person is incapable of the knowledge of right and wrong. Poe is trying to address the absurdity that planning out an evil act to take someone's life can be made null and void through the court of law. The narrator proceeds to comment, "Now this is the point. You fancy me mad," and the point is made that all it takes is

for the psychiatrist to believe the person is insane and the planned conspiracy for murder is of no concern (Poe 767).

Poe is initiating the focus of narration over the psychological realm and bypassing anything that should be deemed as moral. For the narrator, the obsession is with the good of the old man and the bad associated with his eye, but Poe wants the reader to be concerned with what universal agent caused the insanity. The reader has to play along as the psychiatrist unravelling what created madness, and if it was an “Evil Eye” or irritatingly loud beating of the heart, or innate insanity. Cleman notes:

to deflect the significance of a crime from the social and moral to the psychological has a specific social and legal meaning, most apparent in the instance of an insanity defense.

Such deflections, in fact, were a significant part of a controversy over the use of the insanity defense in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the early 1840s.

(86)

Poe demonstrates this controversy through the premeditation to murder the old man and the potential to avoid the same consequences through the insanity defense.

The narrator weaves the reader through the confessional tale of their intent to murder. The murder is not an act of passion or irrational confusion in the heat of a moment, for the narrator moves slowly along an entire week of contemplation against the old man. The narrator describes, “I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it - oh, so gently! . . . Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust [my head] in” (Poe 767). The narrator’s outlandish statement of the reader laughing along with the intrusion of privacy and plotting of murder reveals the narrator’s instability, and the narrator’s conscious action means little when

the revelation points to total insanity. Poe writes his reader into the story by way of the narrator's direct usage of "you," because the reader acting as the madness physician gives greater insight into the mental state of the narrator. The reader must judge whether the narrator is capable of pleading the insanity defense.

Poe anticipates his reader scrutinizing the narrator as someone who is insane. When the narrator prepares to enact the dreadful crime, they declare "and now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses? . . . I have told you that I am nervous: so I am" (Poe 768-769). The narrator again personally addresses the reader to underscore the notion of the reader being responsible for whatever the outcome of the crime. The narrator continues to deny madness and describe their crime as something rational to further emphasize how the narrator is indeed insane.

Poe's narrator becomes as focused on the notion of insanity as they had been on the murdering of the old man. The purpose of the narrator's shift in obsession is to inform the reader of the subject matter Poe held concern for, the insanity defense. Shen provides commentary on Poe's use of societal concerns "[f]or 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" (322). The implicit moral highlighted by Poe is the acute awareness that murder is wrong, and the dramatic irony is the ability established by contemporary laws for that moral to become irrelevant on the basis of insanity. The murder is no longer important in the story and becomes about sanity or lack of it, which is a reflection of the courtroom losing sight on murder and favoring insanity pleas.

The source of the narrator's confidence stems from the possibility to plead insanity in the courtroom due to the M'Naghten Test. When the police officers arrive at the home due to noise

concerns, the narrator is able to remain composed because of this knowledge. Poe's narrator is remarkably calm and kind when welcoming the police officers into the home. The narrator describes to the psychiatrist, who is acted out by the readers:

I smiled - for *what* had I to fear? . . . I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search - search *well*. I led them, at length, to *his* chamber. . . 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, place my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim. (769)

The scene with the police officers, and intimate discussion from the narrator, causes the reader to move back and forth between doubts over whether the narrator is sane or insane. Poe elicits doubt with the intention of creating an awareness of how all the narrator needs is doubt in a courtroom to draw upon the insanity defense.

Once one has an awareness of the insanity defense, there is little doubt left as to why the narrator never denies the murder. The narrator boldly exclaims guilt, "Villains! . . . dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!" (Poe 770). The profession of murder is not out of guilt or fear but irritation. The narrator has come back full circle to obsession with the old man's heart and their own sanity. The optimal witness to a complete mental breakdown and atrocity of murder would be the police officers. The police officers' reactions are of no concern, because the narrator's main focus is on obtaining the ability to plead the insanity defense. The method of dialogue used by the narrator throughout the scene was the most successful tactic available during 1843 to garner belief that one was indeed insane, because people had believed that only an insane person would claim sanity while discussing such grotesque circumstances. Poe leaves his reader with this closing profession of

guilt because it is the reader's responsibility to determine whether the narrator is insane. Poe had hoped the notion would leave a nagging feeling in one's conscience as it did for him with the establishment of the M'Naghten Test.

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