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“The Single Thin Ray That Fell upon the Vulture Eye”: Systemic Grammar and Its Use in Edgar A. Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”

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Abstract

This paper argues that Edgar Allan Poe applies many linguistic techniques in his short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” in order to express the dilemma of a character caught up in the trap of a confused identity, lost subjectivity, and uncontrolled performances. Poe’s story is analyzed in detail to examine the psychology of the performed actions. We analyze some aspects of clause construction, paying attention to ‘who is doing what to whom.’ This analysis is twofold: defining clause construction and discussing why this analysis is relevant and why Poe’s story was chosen for this kind of analysis. In addition, we prove through the grammatical and linguistic choices made by Poe the madness and the instability of the main character in the story. We will be selective in choosing the lines to be discussed, as we focus on the lines that show the main character’s detachment from himself and the rational world he belongs to. The language Poe uses in describing the mad act of killing the old man is highly committed to the psychology and ideology of the text along with its complexities in defining why a man would do what the narrator did.

Key words: Grammar; Stylistics; Poe; Fiction; “The Tell-Tale Heart”; Madness; American Literature; Psychological Fiction; Ideology

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“Even the most trivial behaviors—biting your nails, disgust at the skin on the surface of warm milk, anger and impatience in traffic—are the focus and expression of the most plural and deep psychological complexity” (Freud, p.29).

Madness is hard to define, and it is hard to decide who is mad and who is sane. Some acts seem mad, some words said by some people appear to bear madness in them, but it is really hard to judge them to be pathological. On the surface, we try to interpret people’s bizarre actions by analyzing them, by relating them to a certain theory of psychoanalysis, and we try to color our analysis with evidence from books of theory. All of this seems satisfying and efficient in representing a major part of the truth. But the question is: Is it always easy to judge a certain character in a novel or a short story as representing confused, mad thoughts and actions just because their actions say so? Or do words in such case speak louder than actions? What about the character itself and the words that were put in their mouth by the author? All those questions and more are found somewhere else away from psychology, though not so far.

We have always heard of the saying that it does not matter what you say, that what really matters is how you say it. That is the case when we, as literary researchers, try to connect language and its effects on the ideology of the text. Sometimes language serves this ideology, sometimes it betrays it, and sometimes it meticulously hides it so that the reader pays a lot of effort to unravel its mysteries. Being familiar with the linguistic structure of a text significantly helps to penetrate it and understand what the subjects are and what functions they perform. Still, grammar alone cannot do the trick. A researcher must take into consideration the internal and the external framework of the text, i.e. observing and analyzing the social, psychological, ideological and linguistic aspects that surround the text as well as its grammatical rules and structures.

It is quite essential to take into consideration the practical analysis and the discussion of the language in a particular text; no writer remains neutral and “objective” in his writings as Deidre Burton puts it in her stylistic analysis of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (Carter, 1982). Thus, certain writers try to express their ideology and psychology in what they write, resorting to language as a tool of expression. Edgar A. Poe applies many linguistic techniques in his short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” in order to express his dilemma of having a character caught up in the trap of a confused identity, lost subjectivity and uncontrolled performances.

Poe was an orphan who lost both of his parents when he was a little boy (Peeples, 2004). He left to another house to be raised at, and in that he achieved a successful educational life. Later on in his life, Poe was a victim of gambling, alcoholism, and bad luck in marriage. He suffered from depression and madness; he also attempted suicide in 1848, a year before his natural death in 1849. He was a prolific writer with many great short stories that are considered to be horrific and exciting psychological thrillers. He emphasized in his fiction “hidden motives and detection, altered states of consciousness, sadism, and obsession, as well as the self-destructive tendencies he exhibited in his own life” (Peeples, 2004, p.43).

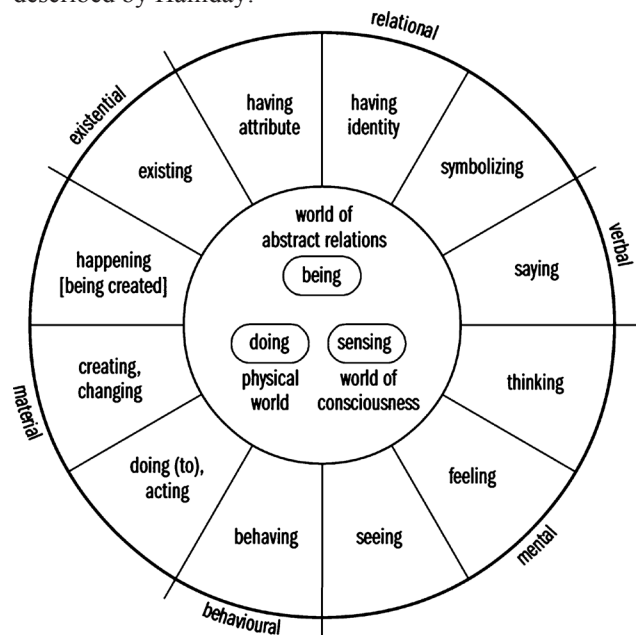
In a psychoanalytic mode of analysis, we can look at “The Tell-Tale Heart” as a register of a narrator and a major actor whose identity is confused, whether mad or fully sane as he claimed. By that we come to define the relationship between his performance and his claims of sanity. According to the analyst Judith Butler, identity is performance, the self is always made and remade in daily interactions. So, the decision of steering it in a different direction might not be a big deal (Butler, 2006). It is quite important to find a distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mock both the expressive model of the identity and the notion of the true identity. In this story the acts are justified by words, so here judgment is based on what is said in order to classify the actions as mad or sane. Again, identity is a performance judged by what is said; it is reinforced by repetition (the narrator) and by defining the true identity (of the old man and his “eye”) as a separate new identity.

Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart” will be analyzed in detail to explore the psychology of the performed actions. We spot the main character who is also the narrator of the event of killing the other main character in the story “the old man”. We mainly analyze some aspects of clause construction, paying a careful attention to the simple question of ‘who is doing what to whom.’ This analysis is twofold: defining clause construction and then discussing why this analysis is relevant to the issues raised in the introduction above and why Poe’s story was chosen for this kind of analysis. In addition, we prove through the grammatical and linguistic choices made by Poe the madness and the instability of the main character of the

story. We will be selective in choosing the lines to be discussed, as we focus on the lines that show the main character’s detachment from himself and the rational world he belongs to.

The representation of the clause will be through the model of processes and participants in the grammatical structure of the clause, inspired from ideas in the work of Michael Halliday. Ideas in general make sense through the processes in which they come to life in our minds. These types of processes are varied; they are material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational, and existential; each process has a grammar of its own and different participants—persons or objects—(Halliday, 2004); added to that are the circumstantial elements (the manner of that process) that are combined with each process. It is quite important to keep in mind that every process is structured grammatically and logically in the same way, but what makes them variant and different is knowing what brought a process about, and whether it was brought from within or outside (Halliday, 2004).

In the figure below, we can see the process options as described by Halliday:



The semantic circle in the figure above allows many meaningful options while interpreting and analyzing a certain text. Having processes and participants widens our scope of understanding the actual reality of the text and the power-relationships played by the character in the socially-constructed world of the text. By that we also get the chance of having a passage through which psychoanalysis can be incorporated in the objective-subjective analysis of the work. That could be possible by constructing different realities of the actions in order to understand who is doing what to whom and also why and how. Understanding the psychology of the text does not mean overlooking it linguistically. According to Clive Bloom (1988), “[T]o Freud each ‘patient’ was a

text, whose fictional life was available for interpretation, whose words, syntax, and style were subject to a ‘reading’ which would reveal hidden and more profound depths” (p.13). A linguistic analysis of a text can reveal the text’s psychological import.

On reading the short story “The Tell-Tale Heart”, we can generally formulate the following assumption: the narrator seems mad and totally in denial of his insanity. There is an accurate description of the act of killing the old man in a detailed, careful manner in addition to the narrator’s extensive justifications of why he did so; he just wanted to “rid [him]self of the eye forever” (Poe, 1966, p.1). We also notice that the other characters are barely there in the story. Added to this is the absence of social implications, as if the narrator and the old man were left alone in the universe.

First, here is a selection of the most remarkable, effective and functional lines in the story. They will be numbered in order to refer to them easily in the discussion to come:

- 1- The disease had sharpened my senses
- 2- I heard many things in hell
- 3- Am I mad?
- 4- How calmly I can tell you the whole story.
- 5- The idea entered my brain
- 6- It haunted me day and night
- 7- I loved the old man
- 8- I think it was his eye!
- 9- One of his eyes resembled that

- 10- Whenever it fell upon me
- 11- My blood ran cold
- 12- I made up my mind
- 13- Rid myself of the eye forever
- 14- How wisely I proceeded--with what caution
- 15- My head was well in the room
- 16- It was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil

Eye

- 17- Thumb slipped upon the tin fastening
- 18- All the world slept
- 19- The terrors that distracted me
- 20- His fears had been ever since growing upon him
- 21- Death in approaching him
- 22- Enveloped the victim
- 23- Shadow that caused him to feel
- 24- Hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow

in my bones

- 25- Came to my ears a low dull quick sound
- 26- It increased my fury
- 27- A new anxiety seized me
- 28- I examined the corpse
- 29- His eye would trouble me no more
- 30- No human eye could have detected anything wrong
- 31- My manner had convinced them
- 32- The noise steadily increased.

Through a simple table, let’s define the actors and the processes as they appear in the lines we numbered 1 through 32. The narrator will be referred to as T.N., and the narrator’s body part as N.B.P. The old man will be referred to as O.M., and the old man’s body part as O.M.B.P.

N	Actor	Process	N	Actor	Process	N	Actor	Process	N	Actor	Process
1	The disease	Sharpened	9	O.M.B.P. his eye	Resembled	17	T.N.I	could contain	25	O.M.B.P.Hideous veil	chilled
2	T.N. I	Heard	10	O.M.B.P. It	Fell	18	N.B.P. my thumb	slipped	26	O.M.B.P.low dull sound	came
3	T.N. I	Am	11	N.B.P.my blood	Ran	19	The world	Slept	27	It	increased
4	T.N. I	can tell	12	T.N.I	Made up	20	The terrors	distracted	28	New anxiety	seized
5	The idea	Entered	13	T.N.	Rid	21	O.M. his fears	growing	29	O.M.B.P.His Eye	would trouble
6	It	haunted	14	T.N. I	Proceeded	22	Death	approaching	30	No human eye	could have detected
7	T.N. I	Loved	15	N.B.P. my head	Was	23	Death	enveloped	31	My manner	had convinced
8	T.N. I	Think	16	O.M.	Vexed	24	Shadow	chased	32	The noise	increased

This simple analysis sheds light on who is doing what to whom when the narrator started describing the events of the story. The first eight sentences show that the narrator made observations of the events that triggered the idea of killing the old man to get rid of his eye forever. He used the first person pronoun “I” and his own mentality to generate the idea of killing the man; added to this is his first non-repeated confession of his insanity, referred to as “the disease”. Then in sentences 9-11 the body parts of both characters dominate the motivation for killing, and then the persona’s determination to take the life of the old man by translating his feelings to a decision in sentences 12, 13, and 17. Then in the awkward procedures that were done by the narrator every night, the narrator’s

body part seems detached from the identity of the narrator in sentences 15 and 18. The following sentences mention some negative agents as actors in sentences 19-24, 28, and 30-32. The body part of the old man as the source of all troubles to the narrator and the reason for seeking his murder appear in sentences 25-27 and 29. The counting of the actors and their actions is as follows:

- The narrator and his body parts as actors: 12
- The old man’s body parts as actors: 6
- Negative persona or agent: 13

It is interesting to note that the major actions in the story are from negative personas or agents/actors, leaving

the rest to the narrator who is the main character in the story. This allows us to feel how much alienated man is from his society and even from himself. The world has left him with no choice other than trying to set everything right in his universe with his own hands. In the words of one critic, such a story testifies to:

The idea that the individual is a naturally occurring unit, that it is preyed upon and entrapped by society, and that true freedom and fulfillment can only be gained by rejecting social pressures, and by giving individuality uninhibited expression. Not only is this the truth of the human species, but it raises the human to a transcendent status. (Mansfield, 2000, p.18)

The narrator in that sense is almost in control of his actions whether done by his “I” or his body parts. He seems to be the generator of the events in the story, and that gives him the power he needs to prove his distinctness as a powerful being that can play God in determining who is to live and who is to die. We notice “the self’s radical distrust of itself, its fear of isolation, dark desire, hidden madness and easy breakdown—a version of subjectivity that has become ever more commonplace as the modern age has progressed” (Mansfield, 2000, p.25).

The old man’s presence throughout the story was his “eye,” which seems to be his “I” that marks his identity and not just the lexical meaning of the word. But the narrator made it clear that the old man’s eye was the source of his anxiety. By describing the eye and its hideousness to him, the narrator brings the real eye back to its lexical significance.

Let’s now discuss the types of the processes involved in our discussion and see how they may enhance our stylistic analysis and the relationship we pose between the story’s message and its linguistic structures:

--Sentences (1, 5, 6, 11, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 27, 31, and 32) = material-action-intention. These sentences resemble the “things” that initiated the actions in the story. Some of these things are related to the narrator’s body parts that seem to be in distance from him and his character; most importantly, “his head” is responsible for all of that horror in the first place, and after he has set his mind to commit this horror, his head is a separate functional entity.

--Sentence (3) = relational (am). The narrator asks himself if he is mad or not. This indicates his duplicity as if he was standing outside himself and asking questions about his own reality if mad or sane.

--Sentences (4, 13, 14, and 28) = material-action-intention. The narrator seems in control of what he does; added to that is the act of the killing and the concealment of the old man’s body. The narrator generously used many adverbs from the beginning until the end of the story like: very, dreadfully, healthily, calmly, gradually, wisely, gently, cunningly, cautiously, boldly, fairly, steadily, presently, patiently, stealthily, precisely, well, gaily, hastily, silently, cleverly, singularly, cheerily, freely, and fluently. All these adverbs show the manner and the

circumstances that accompanied all of his actions. These adverbs were used excessively by the narrator to prove his sanity by sophisticating his language as if he were absolutely sane.

--Sentence (2) = mental-externalized-process (I heard all in heaven and hell).

--Sentences (7, 8, and 12) = mental-internalized-cognition

--Sentence (25) = material-action-supervention (came to my ears a low dull quick sound).

We notice that the narrator’s most effective actions that led him to kill the man were of cognition and mental processes. His acute “hearing” made him really nervous when he heard the beating of the old man’s heart; which is a real indicator of his complicated psychology proven by the idea that “even the most trivial behaviors—biting your nails, disgust at the skin on the surface of warm milk, anger and impatience in traffic—are the focus and expression of the most plural and deep psychological complexity” (Freud, 1966, p.29). The narrator is a good example of such character. The narrator is also helpless about his anxieties and his temperament. He cannot help not getting angry from trivial things like the color and the shape of the old man’s eye and the old man’s heart beat.

Sentences (9, 10, 20, 24, 26, and 29) = material-action-supervention. These actions were done by the old man’s body parts, not directly by him. Although these actions are “superventional”, they are “intentional” to the narrator. The narrator’s madness allows him to make a separation between the identity of the old man as a good neighbor, who never hurt him or insulted him, and his eye that represented all evilness and fear to him. Throughout the story, the old man was never given the microphone to say a word to the reader. The reader did not even have any chance to know what was going on in the old man’s mind. All what is related to him was outside him; it seems that his body took the initiative of performing enough evil to make the narrator determinate to end the old man’s life.

The question that comes to our mind concerns the author himself and what he was thinking about when he wrote such a story. Was he writing from his consciousness or his unconsciousness? Did he intend saying what he said the way he did, or was it just a natural flow of his words? This quotation by Claudia Morrison (1968) summarizes all the questions that we might legitimately think of:

Was the artist a neurotic individual who found release for his emotional problems in artistic expression, or was he a superior individual endowed with a greater than normal ability to harness unconscious emotional forces and transform them into universally communicable images and themes? To what extent did art represent a “wish-fulfillment” of the artist’s unconscious needs and desires? What part did consciousness play in the creative process? If the source of creativity was the unconscious, how were the artist’s personal symbols rendered meaningful to his audience? To what degree was the effect of the art work on its audience a result of the unconscious appeal of its content and to what extent was it a result of purely formal qualities? (pp. 43-44)

But it is agreed on that Poe is a distinctive artist with a wild imagination; he thought of the “perfect crime” and then translated his thoughts into a story to motivate the readers to look deep in that story and play the detective, or even to frighten them. Since Poe’s concerns are mostly about madness and horror in his literary career, this story served our intention to find a link between the language of the text and its ideology. In the text, ideology functions in the psychological import we proved. In other words, the writer’s intentions are not that easy to reveal; all we could demonstrate is that the language Poe used in describing the mad act of killing the old man was highly committed to the psychology of the text along with its complexities in defining why a man would do what the narrator did.

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