

A critical comparison of Poe's exploration of madness in 'The Tell-tale Heart', 'The Black Cat' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.

Across the three texts: "The Black Cat", "The Tell-tale Heart" and "The Fall of The House of Usher", the theme of madness is explored by Poe. His use of a seemingly unreliable first person narrator in each story, allows this theme to be accentuated. Other literary techniques include Poe's use of setting, characterisation and symbolism. Poe effectively engages the reader and provides a subliminal outlook at the concept of madness and mental health at the time of the 19th century. His handling of these subjects seems quite progressive for an issue that is only truly being appreciated nearly 200 years later.

Horror is a genre of speculative fiction which is intended to, or has the capacity to frighten, scare, disgust, or startle its readers by inducing feelings of horror and terror. Poe writes in the horror genre as a way of displaying to the reader the terrifying effects that madness can have on people who may seem normal from an initial observation. By showing the terrors a mad mind can construct, Poe highlights the need to provide support and help to victims of this problem, as the mental state of all the narrators in his stories seem to progressively worsen. This progression occurs over a drawn out period of time due to a number of external influences that are referenced below. These changes can also can happen quickly, and without warning, and it is through the induction of fear that Poe emphasises his message that a deteriorating mental state is not always pre-existing but rather can be brought about by circumstances that are not always known or can be controlled.

Poe makes use of the key Romantic motifs: the value of wilderness against human-made order and the value of personal emotion over reason. As well as being a Romantic writer,

Poe is considered by certain critics a classical writer. Darlene Harbour Unrue wrote the article: "Edgar Allan Poe: The Romantic as Classicist",¹ stating:

"romantic and Gothic elements in his fiction and poetry act as proof of Poe's predilection for the subjective, macabre, and fantastic, as well as the transcendental. A careful examination of Poe's use of seemingly romantic materials, however, reveals that he measured the romantic stance detrimentally against the objectivity and rationality of the classical."

Poe's romantic style works in harmony with his consideration of madness as he is presenting his narrator's behaviour and thoughts as a sort of rebellion against the established human order and civilisation. By displaying powerful emotions and aggressive urges adds more drive to his account of madness in his work. Through Poe's emotive writing, the mania of his characters is driven further into the spotlight, their extreme feelings and expressions appear more psychotic than what is considered normal. The first person narrative used creates a feeling of claustrophobia in the reader as they feel like they are trapped in the narrator's mind and its incumbent madness with no release or reprieve, Poe using only one perspective for the events.

Across the three texts, an unnamed first person narrator is employed in order to draw the reader directly into the story and create a sense of intimacy between them. This direct address creates a storytelling atmosphere as if they are personally being told the story by the narrator himself. In each story, the effects of madness on the narrator are clear to observe, and the profound impact this has is that it makes one question the clarity of the narrator's thought processes making them unreliable in the telling. This intimates that what the narrator is recounting should not be fully trusted as his account is biased, his mental state having deteriorated.

At the beginning of 'The Black Cat', the narrator urges the reader to believe that he is not mad: *"Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad I am not."* Writing this as soon as the story begins, immediately establishes the motif of denial in the text to highlight the narrator's unreliability - as the

¹ Unrue, Darlene Harbour. "Edgar Allan Poe: The Romantic as Classicist." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1995, pp. 112–119. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30221867.

actions of the narrator become more obscene, his denials of madness become less and less believable. This allows the reader to clearly see the extent of the narrator's mental decay. Starting the story in this way may suggest to the reader that future events might occur in the story that will contradict the narrator's sanity: through the narrator denying his madness, the opposite effect is achieved and the reader actually questions the narrator's sanity and thus reliability. The narrator blames his actions on powers beyond his control as if he were possessed - *"The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer."*

Poe wished to instantly introduce the theme of madness to the story, making the reader question why the narrator is having to justify his sanity. The opening of 'The Black Cat' suggests that the narrator had once been caring and loving to the cat in question but these feelings change as the tale progresses into a twisted and unmotivated hatred, highlighting the narrator's mental deterioration. Poe begins the tale with self-justification about the main character's mental state but the unfolding story proves they are deluding themselves, their descent into madness all too obvious, their narration unreliable.

Similarly, in 'The Tell-tale Heart', the narrator's denial of his madness is directly introduced with perhaps more urgency and with a more desperate tone:

"very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" Use of the rhetorical question creates a direct link from narrator to reader, seeming to demand reasoning to justify the accusation of madness that he feels is being pointed at him. This justification must be achieved through reading further, and by doing so, sufficient evidence can be gathered.

"You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded - with what caution - with what foresight!"

The narrator's poor vindication for his actions proves they are not of sound mind and their mental state continues to become more fragile. In both texts, the narrator's rushed denial of madness results in the reader now questioning further events in the stories, and it is by

virtue of Poe's use of tonality and word choice that the theme of madness is implemented into these short stories.

In the 'Tell-tale Heart', the narrator is continually nervous and this creates an unsettling feeling as he appears erratic and somewhat dangerous, building further the tone of horror. This nervousness comes from the narrator's fear of having his madness exposed to the reader, which is somewhat irrational as his terrible actions are described by him as if they were normal. His lack of reasoning surrounding the motive for the murder he commits expands on the theme of madness as he seems very unpredictable: "*It is impossible to say how the idea first entered my brain.*" The narrator's mental decay is compounded through the torment he receives as a result of his murderous thoughts: "*once conceived, it haunted me day and night.*" The emphasis on both 'day' and 'night' further suggests the extent of his suffering and the word choice of 'haunted' has connotations of the supernatural dread that is tormenting him, which is commonly described in patients with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder². This could suggest that for the narrator in 'The Tell-tale Heart', his mad behaviour could be pre-existing and is not the result of external influences such as alcohol as in 'The Black Cat'. By providing an alternative insight into other causes of madness, Poe could be suggesting that there are many different ways it can come about and that madness can be interpreted in different ways depending on the person.

The use of word choices that describe the narrator's paranoia is effective as it builds upon the tense atmosphere already developed: "*I foamed - I raved - I swore!*". Through the erratic behaviour of the narrator, fear is established in the reader as the lack of intent in these horrific thoughts gives the story a realistic edge, reminiscent of many people's fears. This unstable behaviour is further highlighted by the narrator's lack of ability to pinpoint what is causing this mental upset. Unsure and indecisive as to what actually was 'haunting' him, he highlights the fact that he: "*loved the old man.*" The narrator then proceeds to fixate on the idea that it was the blind eye of the old man that caused him to commit the murder,

² <https://mindyourmind.ca/blog/ask-dr-roger-violent-thoughts>
<http://sethgillichan.com/monster-obsessions-hurting-people/>

"I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!" This unconvincing and seemingly irrelevant reason to commit the crime represents the overarching insanity of the narrator. It is through Poe's use of the exclamatory that the denial of the narrator is stressed - he is blaming another man's physical flaw, a blind eye, for his violent and irrational actions. He is convinced that the police hear the heart beating as he does and this forces his confession: *"It grew louder - louder - louder! (...) Almighty God! - no, no! They heard!"*

In 'The Black Cat', the narrator blames his alcohol addiction as being the main factor that influences his actions rather than his decaying mental state. Although alcohol may not be the central reasoning for his abominable actions later in the story, it does seem to act as a catalyst for his continuing breakdown, and this is recognised by the narrator:

"my disease grew upon me - for what disease is like Alcohol!"

Poe capitalizes 'Alcohol' and uses an exclamation mark to emphasise its profound impact on his mentality. Remorse almost immediately follows the killing of the cat but again he blames his drinking:

"When I slept off the night's debauch - I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse for the crime which I had been guilty (...) I again plunged into excess and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed".

In 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the mental condition of the narrator initially seems normal, differing from both of the other texts as the narrator does not try and hide behind the facade of sanity. Instead, Poe uses a focus on setting and the effect that the actual House has on the narrator. When he approaches the house, his immediate thoughts and feelings are extensively described in order to establish a bleak setting for the story: *"irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all"*. He creates a connection between the narrator's mental state and the house by displaying the vexing and depressing effect that the house has on the narrator's feelings and thoughts:

"I looked upon the scene before me (...) - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows(...) white trunks of decaying trees".

This feeling of dread and melancholy is accentuated through Poe's gloomy word choice:

"with an utter depression of the soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation."

By detailing the compromising effects that the House of Usher has on the narrator's mental state, it is seen that the House carries an atmosphere of decay and sickness that affects not just the narrator, but the surrounding landscape as well. We learn that the decay in the House reflects the mental decay of the Usher family, with Roderick being at the forefront of this:

"he suffered from a morbid acuteness of the senses."

This use of the word "suffered" suggests that he notices Roderick's anxiety and paranoia which continues to grow as the story progresses. The phrasing of 'morbid' in the narration is also effective as it subtly brings mention of death and the suggestion that Roderick's senses seem to have become more acute tells the reader that Roderick is anticipating and is in fear of death. This is effectively foreshadows the future events of the story where Roderick is strangled to death by his sister, and also shows the profound effect that paranoia and anxiety can have on the mind. This is seen through the House itself, which reflects the fear Roderick has through the atmospheric gloom and the feelings of perpetual death that haunt those that visit, as the House is a symbol of the family of Usher's disintegration. Poe is trying to suggest that inner mental turmoil can be seen in the disrepair of the environment that people live in and by the way in which people live. By displaying a shift in the mood of the narrator, Poe is suggesting that madness can be embedded in people depending on the environments they surround themselves in as the narrator was otherwise fine before visiting the House, which has a sickening effect on his aura.

In 'The Black Cat' the narrator comments on a shift in his thoughts and feelings:

"I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others."

This presents the awareness that the narrator shows regarding his decaying mental condition. By doing so, Poe is highlighting the helplessness of the narrator, unable to prevent his own mental deterioration despite being aware of it. Poe is indicating that people

should be more sympathetic towards those who suffer from madness as they are not responsible for their actions and it is not occurring with their intention.

Across many of his works, Poe uses pathetic fallacy to signify the mental conflict of the narrator. In 'The Fall of the House of Usher' the use of extensive descriptions of the dreary weather as the story begins, acts as a symbolic interpretation of the narrator's mood as they are influenced by the house, "*Whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low.*" The word 'oppressively' further builds on this bleak ambience and also begins to reflect the feeling of a pressure, a burden that the narrator begins to describe as he approaches the house for the first time. This is especially effective as the reader can understand the deteriorating effect that the House of Usher has on the narrator. Poe creates a connection between the setting and madness in this story, and suggests that one feeds off of the other.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher", the motif of decay is used to highlight the effect that the house is having on the narrator's mind during his visit there. Fungi is used as a symbol for this spreading decay: "*minute fungi overspread the whole exterior*". This fungal growth all over the house metaphorically represents the growth of madness in the narrator's mind and can be used to show the connection between the House and the narrator. Despite the significance of setting in: 'The Fall of the House of Usher', there is a distinct lack of this technique in both 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-tale Heart'. This contrasting absence of description actually augments the feeling of being trapped in the narrator's mind. There is a much greater focus on the narrator's actions and extreme thoughts rather than on place in 'The Tell-tale Heart'. The lack of setting in 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart' provides a simplicity that focuses the reader upon the narrator and what he is saying, rather than weighing down the stories. In an article by Paul Wasel³, the reasoning for the simplicity of his stories is explained. As the stories are not convoluted, the scarier aspects of

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<http://scalar.usc.edu/works/lucas-collection-poetry-scrapbook/edgar-allan-poe-friend-of-fear-and-master-of-madness>

the story have more emphasis, and therefore the reader can experience more emotions whilst reading :

“Why were these readers attracted to such grim and grotesque themes? The answer may rest in the seemingly paradoxical relationship between pleasure and pain. In certain situations, pain and fear can arouse feelings of delight and pleasure within an individual’s body and mind.”

If Poe had intended to entice readers in this way then it might explain why he had less of a focus on setting - he would rather the reader can understand and follow the movements of the narrator. Whatever the case, Poe displays his ability to use setting as a way of affecting madness in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, and through its extensive use in this story he creates a narrator whose struggles with madness seem to gain nourishment from the setting of the story.

Across the three stories, Poe applies a number of symbols for a more subtle representation of the madness that consumes the narrators. Through use of symbolism, Poe is able to leave underlying messages and ideas that provide a deeper understanding of the mental torment that they represent. One such symbol is the eye from ‘The Tell-tale Heart’. In this story, the eye appears to have a few different symbolic meanings, one of which has to do with the fact that it is *“pale blue, with a film over it”*. This indicates the lack of visual clarity and reliability that the narrator has when trying to look at and understand the world. He cannot see the world from a normal perspective, just as the old man cannot physically view the world (with this eye). Poe is trying to communicate that the narrator does not know he’s mad because the way in which he sees the world appears normal to him but obviously not to someone of a sound mind. This suggests that Poe believes that society’s interpretation of madness is subjective, and is not very sympathetic and understanding of the victim. As well as showing the horrendous acts committed by the protagonist, he is highlighting the frightening notion that people could have severe mental illnesses and not even know that they aren’t acting and behaving like normal people.

Symbolism is further used in 'The Tell-tale Heart' with the watch being an obvious representation of time and the time it takes for the narrator to fully descend into madness, committing murder. Poe uses watches as a symbol for the approach of death across many of his other stories as well. In 'The Tell-Tale Heart' he uses this symbol to highlight the narrator's control over the time he takes to commit the murder. As well as building on the theme of madness, this adds more to the horror aspect of the story. The narrator ominously builds up to the murder of the old man as he stalks him relentlessly and it is unremitting and disturbing.

In 'The Black Cat', "eye" symbolism is used in a similar way to that of 'The Tell-tale Heart' but with a different resulting effect. In 'The Black Cat', Pluto the cat has his eye cut out by the narrator. This has significance as it is the first display of his demented violence yet the narrator denies that he is mad. When the narrator finds a new cat, which strikingly resembles Pluto, it is observed that it too is lacking an eye. This is a symbol of the narrator's guilt as he sees a resemblance between this cat and Pluto. This overwhelming guilt is what appears to consume him and make his madness worse as he again attempts to kill this new cat. He is trying to free himself from the guilt he feels as he sees Pluto in this other cat. Poe once more is conveying the idea that madness can be caused by internal factors, in this case is guilt, as well as external factors such as the alcohol the protagonist consumes to excess.

In conclusion, Poe revolutionized the view of madness through his interpretations of it at the time, and through the use of narrative, setting, symbolism and other techniques such as pathetic fallacy, he delivers intensely written horror stories with a subliminal message that detail the complexity of madness. His use of an unnamed unreliable narrator effectively establishes a storytelling atmosphere that adds an intimate edge to his writing for the reader to experience - it feels as though the reader is trapped in the narrator's mind with no escape from the madness that then consumes him. The internal influences that result in madness can be seen across the three texts studied, and Poe's message is well delivered in a number of ways, through a range of factors that affect the madness of each narrator: alcoholism,

guilt, disease, paranoia and anxiety. According to Morgan E. Elswick writing for Cleveland State University⁴:

“the illogicality of madness and its ability to override a person’s reason, enabling them to commit brutal crimes without guilt, is the true fear being exploited by Poe.”

It can be agreed that Poe uses madness as a way of adding a realistic fear factor to his horror works, as people may be afraid that they too will succumb to the horrors of insanity. It is argued that he writes about madness in order to express his personal opinions about an aspect many other writers at the time were too scared to confront⁵.

Bibliography

Primary Texts:

- “The Black Cat” by Edgar Allan Poe
- “The Tell-tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe
- “The Fall Of The House Of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe

Below texts were used to further understand Poe’s writing style. These feature the theme of madness also:

- “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe
- “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe

⁴ <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol2/iss2/2/>

⁵ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/35621>

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- “The Unspeakable: Fearing Madness in Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ ” by Morgan E. Elswick

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Further sources used for research

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- <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/35621>