Telling the Tale of Hate

The majority of criticism focuses on the mindset of the narrator in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Upon reading the story, one could fathom the many different possibilities, as have scholars, as to exactly what that mental state in fact is. Is he paranoid schizophrenic, bipolar, psychopath, sociopath, or is he just plain insane? These are among the possibilities when one focuses on labeling Poe’s narrator. Another path critics have taken involve the analysis of why the narrator was moved to perform this heinous act on an innocent: a sadomasochistic element or other sexually driven pleasure (Pritchard 144). Others have posited the doppleganger effect, ushering in the gothic element, as this is a Poe writing after all. The doppleganger reading explores the possibility of a connection between the old man’s “eye” and the narrator’s “I” (Ki 26). However, a far less obvious reading has been overlooked—one that is “staring” right at us. Further screening of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” reveals a far greater and more universal message from the author within its juxtaposition of murder and psychosis. Poe is commenting on the ease with which we as humans perform and justify our own murderous actions and behaviors towards one another through our basic human use of rhetoric, blindness to our own faults, and good old-fashioned narcissism.
Our human instincts concentrate on one difference, or assumed difference, in people that are different from us, and we are threatened by such differences. Ranges include differences in physical appearance, beliefs, ethnicity, gender, color, clothing, address, and even hairstyle. Nothing is off limits. Accordingly, Donald Moss says, “For the hating subjects, these objects are self evidently dangerous, and the appropriate sentiments and behaviors, no matter how violent, all share the stated aim of promoting safety and diminishing threat” (xviii). Fixation concentrates on the differences that are threatening and no matter how violent, hate is spawned and bred. Consider the obsession the narrator has with the eye. He says, “One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale eye, with film over it” (677). It was different, self evidently dangerous, and he concentrated on it: “Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (677). The eye bothers him (“dangerous”), causing his blood to run cold (“sentiments”), and then slowly the hatred for the eye becomes so severe that he reasons (“behaviors”) that the only way to rid himself of the bothersome eye is to “take the life of the old man” (“no matter how violent”).

How does hate, therefore, become so embittered to the point of such cruelty? A doctor and pioneer in the study of cruelty and hatred, Wilhelm Stekel, placed the effects of our feelings into two categories: attractive and repellant (23). Within the repellant feelings of hatred lie the preservation of self, and whatever “threatens” (recall diminishing threat) the self becomes the object of hate (Stekel 23). Stekel continues, “Hatred seeks ultimately to remove the hated object from the subject who hates” (23). The narrator is our subject, and the eye is the hated object. The eye endangers the self, and the self immediately seeks its
removal. Cruelty arises, here again “sentiments,” to the point of fulfilling hate’s purpose: the removal of the hated object and thus promoting safety and diminishing threat. Armed with the knowledge of this basic human behavior, Poe begins to set forth his commentary.

In order to tell this story, Poe needed a mouthpiece—someone that could demonstrate the very acts of evil possible by humanity—enter the narrator and his rhetorical delivery. The approach of this story also helps provide the meaning behind its purpose and is written in a style where the narrator is defending his actions, pleading his case. His initial question challenges us as to why we think of him as a madman. He then proceeds to methodically, through rhetorical devices, to reveal his process, giving the feeling of being in a courtroom (Zimmerman 34). This is where Poe uses the words of the narrator to mimic those that go on inside our own heads. Poe allows the narrator to journey into the depths of the psyche to show the birth, feeding, growth, and results of fixating on one single flaw in another human being. In this case, it was the old man’s eye. It was the eye that threatened him. It was the eye the narrator concentrated on over and over again. Even though he could not explain the very reason how this obsession started, there was just something about the eye that bothered him. Not only did this difference fester, but also fed his obsession with a constant focus on and nightly search for the quality he so hated. The rhetoric used touches close to home in all of us. In his book, *The Human Race*, Robert Antelme says of our species’ justifications that we are “sustaining the axiom we’re always prepared to use, the ultimate line of defense: ‘They aren’t people like us’” (219). The “they” starts with a “him” or a “her,” at a much smaller level then spirals out of control. Our behaviors are justified internally through this type of rhetoric, yet our ability to see the faults in others blinds us to our own because they are not like us.
Self-justification of our own cruelties leaves us blind to the qualities others might see in us. As we focus on those “repellant feelings” within ourselves, hatred turns a blind eye inwardly. As Magdale Wing-chi Ki asserts, “Edgar Allen Poe’s narrator...judge[s] the old man based on his own (the narrator’s) affections and not the truth. The deliberate (mis)judgment [sic] of the other can only mirror the “blindness” of the self, signifying a lack of insight” (25). Ki’s mention of judging the old man based on affection leads to misjudgment and finally blindness paves the way to hatred and cruelty. This “Biblical truth” stems from a passage in the New Testament book of Matthew that says, “And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (*New American Standard Bible*, Matt. 7.3). Poe might have studied his New Testament and incorporated into this story. The eye must just be a coincidence, but there does appear to be a reference here. Our hatred of the “speck” in others seems to be a universal and timeless problem. Even a moral exemplar of 2000 years ago was addressing the issue, and we are still addressing it to this today. Human behavior concentrates on the “not like us” elements in others, and fails to contemplate that the differences in us are “not like others” either. This makes judging others and justifying it second nature.

Furthermore, at the heart of our own ease at self-justification and self-preservation rests narcissism. Notice how our narrator flaunts the ease and skill with which he performs his feat: “Hearken! And observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story” (677). His level of excitement and rhetorical pride manifests a narcissistic mentality. When we describe one as being narcissistic, we are merely pointing out a natural human tendency that resides in every one of us. Often referred to as egocentrism, our self-centered nature derives pleasure at the cruelty of others (Pritchard 144). Stekel also points to the
fact that “They [we] envy others the feeling of happiness in life. It builds up a new, secret
formula: ‘Pain for me and pain for you’... For cruelty, there must be the consciousness of
cruelty, joy in another’s hurt, delight in a sense of power over another’s life” (27). Poe’s
narrator “smiled gaily” after placing the bed upon the old man while in the throws of
cruelty. As the narrator continues to relay the details, one can sense the joy of anticipation
leading up to and during the removal of the hated quality.

It took “several nights” to get that look from the old man, and there was nothing else
that had come between himself and the old man to cause initial cruel and murderous
feelings. It was his eye, an eye that bothered him so much that he had to get rid of it—“no
matter how violent.” We focus on one another and stand in judgment of one another so
much that we focus on the one element of the whole and declare a sentence. The inner
struggle for survival, safety, and ridding ourselves of the perceived threat become
delightful. That delight, however, did not return until he saw the eye again. He had to see it,
focus on it, and delight in the removal and power over it. Once these feelings had built and
the eye seen, the act could then be carried forth.

The narrator’s breakdown at the end of the story is the reality settling back in. The
euphoria that once consumed him is gone. As happens in acts of violence and judgment,
those feelings pass. The reality of the situation begins to unfold (the beating of the heart)
and close in around him (in his ears), revealing the true nature of what he has done. He
experiences guilt because he realizes that it was a person, and this revelation causes an
internal epiphany that the quality was connected to a human being with a heart, feelings,
and a heartbeat. This realization brings disgrace over what he has done. Poe is now able to
rely on the sound to play the part of the guilt and revelation. The guilt is so “loud” that the narrator is unable to even perform the simplest of tasks like, say, carry on a conversation with the officers.

Looking at Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” through this lens gives one an indication of the insight the he had into the human psyche. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, much analysis is dedicated to the psychological state of the narrator himself, as an individual who is suffering from a mental disease. Instinctively this makes sense, but a more purposefully conducted reading goes beyond this interpretation. The narrator specifically asks, “...but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them” (677). What then should be the diagnosis? The narrator gives us a little narcissism and blindness all wrapped in rhetoric: “Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and earth. I heard many things in hell. How then am I mad?” (677). Plain and simple he is not mad; he is representative of a universal human condition (play disturbing organ music here): hatred and cruelty.
Works Cited


34-49. Print.