

## Edgar Allan Poe: Master Story Teller

Of all the major American writers, perhaps none has had more of an influence on the short story than Edgar Allan Poe. His success was won at great personal cost. Poe's life was short, spanning a mere forty years. Further, those forty years were filled with torment, suffering, alcohol addiction, and financial hardship.. Perhaps even more remarkable was Poe's continued willingness to follow his "art" despite the critical disfavor he encountered in America. Yet, in a bizarre twist of fate, Poe's tragic life provided substance for his art. Likewise, his work as an editor and literary critic for a variety of publications helped him perfect his craft. His life and his work experiences enabled Poe to develop his theory regarding the short story, and they provided him with the creative ideas to bring his theory into literary reality. In his book, The Genius of Edgar Allan Poe, Georges Zayed states, "One fact which is nevertheless certain is that Poe brought the short story to its perfection, and excelled in all kinds of tales" (87). One such example is the much admired, often anthologized "Tell-Tale Heart." A careful analysis of this story illustrates how Poe incorporated his theory in the construction of a short story.

Poe was born on January 19, 1809. His parents, traveling actors, died when he was only three years old. Poe was then raised by Mr. and Mrs. John Allan. Poe's life was fairly uneventful until he went to the University of Virginia where he gambled and consumed alcohol to excess. Angered by Poe's college gambling and drinking, Mr. Allan refused to pay Poe's gambling debts and his educational expenses. Because of this, Poe was unable to return to college. Poe enlisted in the army rather than work as a clerk. After a two year tour of duty, and following a brief period as a cadet at West Point, Poe was once again rejected by Mr. Allan. Poe decided to live with his widowed aunt, Maria Clemm, and her daughter, Virginia. Poe eventually fell in love with his cousin, Virginia, and in 1836, he married her. She was just thirteen years old at the time of their marriage. Poe, lacking any financial support from Mr. Allan, began to support Virginia and himself through his writing (Howarth 2). When Poe was twenty-seven years old, Mr. Allan died leaving Poe without an inheritance. In fact, Mr. Allan had raised him as ". . .an unadopted son, without the assurance of a permanent legal—or psychological—identity" (2). Poe resented his disinheritance. He wanted to become a poet, and he had hoped his inheritance would provide a financial base to pursue his poetry. Not having the

inheritance meant Poe had to use his writing skills as an editor and journalist instead. The impact of not having a psychological identity surely played an important part in shaping the type of person and writer that Poe would become. Mr. Allan's death was just one of many that Poe would have to face in his short life. The deaths of his loved ones and friends led to Poe's preoccupation with death. As an artist, Poe viewed death differently than his contemporaries:

If death assumed such importance in Poe's works, it is because more than others he came to know the tragic content of the word—and at a very early age. It struck several times “at his chamber door”; it took away his parents, then Mrs. Allan, his adopted mother, and Mrs. Stanard, and his brother; finally his young wife, his beloved Virginia. How could he have escaped from his obsession with it and from the terror which it instilled in him? (Zayed 93)

Throughout his life Poe experienced nightmares. As was typical of Poe, rather than fear his dreams, he came to an understanding of -how he could use them in his writing. According to Vincent Buranelli in his book, Edgar Allan Poe:

He took to inspecting with meticulous exactitude his psychological states when he hovered between sleep and wakefulness, found his mind occupied with shadows of ideas “rather Psychical than intellectual,” and learned to some degree to control them. (26)

Poe's exposure to death and his willingness to analyze his dreams led him to write in a different style. The resulting characters and plots caused a great deal of misunderstanding regarding Poe. This misunderstanding is centered on his subject matter more so than his ability as a writer. Poe's unique background, coupled with his genius and his ability to use his imagination to take readers where other writers had not gone before, created uncomfortable topics for his short stories. While his contemporaries were critical, the readers responded to his stories. Poe recognized people's fears and put those fears into his short stories:

Vices which we carefully hide out of shame or fear, ignoble acts which we only dare to commit in the imagination, crimes which we perpetrate coldly but, through weakness, only mentally; vengeance which we have not put into execution but whose accomplishment we have secretly and ardently desired. Poe had the audacity to realize them for us in his stories. (Zayed 108).

Given Poe's need to earn a living and his ability as a writer, he eventually became an editor, a position he held in a series of publications: the Southern Literary Messenger, Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, Graham's Magazine, and the Broadway Journal. In each publication, he was able to increase readership; however, his addiction to alcohol and his disagreeable personality eventually caught up with him, causing him to be fired from each editorship. "This was to be the paradoxical pattern for Poe's career: success as an artist and editor but failure to satisfy his employers and to secure a livelihood" (Academic American Encyclopedia).

Poe's work as editor provided him with another skill that would serve him well in the development of his short story theory. In addition to his duties as an editor, Poe also worked as a literary critic, a task at which he excelled- Undoubtedly, his exposure to the works of the best writers of the era benefited Poe greatly and helped sharpen his knowledge and his exposure to the works of the best writers of the era benefited Poe greatly and helped sharpen his knowledge and perception of the development of the short story.

Yet, even with his salary as an editor and critic, his income was not substantial enough to keep him from hardship and poverty. Poe found he had to write short stories to supplement his earnings. Through his experience in increasing the readership of the publications for which he worked, Poe gained an appreciation of the short story market. "As editor he tried to please his public, and he succeeded by printing good short stories" (Buranelli 64). Poe was a dedicated, prolific writer. During a period of seventeen years, Poe wrote over sixty-eight short stories (Howarth 7).

The commercial need for quality short stories did not escape Poe's attention. The magazines of the day were demanding, and paying for, short stories to fill their pages:

Intimately in touch with the mass market, he recognized and exploited the prevailing drift in the reading habits of Americans. "We now demand," he considers, "the light artillery of the intellect; we need the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused—in place of the verbose, the detailed, the voluminous, the inaccessible. (Buranelli 64,65)

Thus the maturation of Poe was complete. His life had been filled with tragedy, death, hardship, and an addiction to alcohol. Financial needs forced him to earn a living in the competitive

literary marketplace. His works were criticized by his contemporaries in America because of his unique and morbid subject matter. Despite these obstacles, Poe found within his creative genius the courage to develop and present his short story theory. According to Poe: the short story must be read in one sitting and during this sitting the soul of the reader is under the writer's control; there are no other external or extrinsic influences to distract the reader. The short story does not have space for the development of character or for a variety of incidents to occur. The construction of the story is far more important than in a novel and the writer must carefully consider his plot, keeping both the ending and the beginning in mind at all times; and the writer must strive to achieve a single effect (Zayed 80). The concept of a single effect is described by Poe in a passage quoted by Zayed:

He had not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain single effect to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the outbrining of this effect, then in his very first step has he committed a blunder. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length pointed which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale, its thesis, has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed—an end absolutely demanded, yet, in the novel, -altogether unattainable (XIII, 153). (80,81)

To illustrate Poe's theory, an analysis of one of his short stories would be helpful. One such story, the "Tell-Tale Heart," has appeared in many anthologies and is familiar to many readers. To guide its analysis, the following recap of Poe's theory will be used.

- The story must be readable in a single sitting
- The story contains a single effect and the readers attention is focused on this effect
- The short story will not attempt to develop characters or a variety of incidents
- The structure is carefully planned with all intervening actions supporting the single effect
- The story will contain a unifying element

While “The Tell-Tale Heart” takes the average reader no more than a fifteen minute sitting to finish, these are certainly an affective fifteen minutes as Poe produces and sustains the single emotion of guilty terror. His words, sentences, and pacing create a tightly-knit, single effect that has become legendary. From beginning to end, the reader is under Poe’s spell.

Poe begins his control as the story’s narrator, a madman,, describes his sharpened senses. In a nervous, choppy manner, the madman says, “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” (Poe 799). By using short, abrupt phrases and sentences with a variety of punctuation, Poe alerts the reader to the narrator’s mental state. The reader feels that he is about to sit down with an unstable individual.

Poe continues to use the right words and sequencing as the narrator describes the object of his discontent: the old man’s eye:

I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over 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 (799).

Certainly, the phrasing, the punctuation, and word choice create the desired effect.

Poe masterfully employs this technique throughout the story and his brilliance with it reaches a peak when the madman is murdering the old man:

The old man’s hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I had dragged him to the floor and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. (802)

As a counterbalance, Poe changes patterns after the murder. The narrator seems to relax once the deed is done and to imitate this, Poe’s prose slows. He achieves this by using longer sentences with a gentle rhythm.

This gentleness does not last long. Guilty terror is beginning to take its toll on the madman. His heart is beating wildly even though he has seemingly fooled the inspecting police officers. By

the last paragraph of the story, the madman has gone over the edge, and Poe's words and pacing clearly capture this. The madman relieves his guilt with an overcharged, passion-filled confession. By the story's end, the reader is thoroughly aware of Poe's remarkable ability to create a single effect.

Relying on this one effect, Poe wastes no effort adding elaborate, unnecessary details about the characters to divert the reader's attention. His madman has one goal in mind: killing the old man. The reader isn't burdened with day-to-day, menial interactions between the two men, for example. His character is good as what he does, and he does only one thing. Poe has carefully planned the story's structure and its focus so that an eight night span of time for the madman is compressed into fifteen minutes of unabated terror for the reader.

The story has one unifying element tracing through it. The madman's senses, especially his hearing, have been sharpened by an unexplained disease. This thread is introduced in the opening paragraph and intensifies as the story moves forward. His beating heart contributes to the murder. "It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage" (801). His own beating heart also contributes to the confession when, at first, he realizes "that the noise was not within my ears" (803). Tension mounts for him as he feels the sound increasing. "It was a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not" (803). The beating continues to increase until the madman snaps. His guilty terror forces his confession: "'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (803). The madman, along with the reader, feels the pulsating effect of this unifying element.

Poe's troubled life and morbid imagination gave birth to his gripping short stories. During his life, fame and financial success alluded him. Now, one hundred forty-three years after his death, his place in the history of literature has been secured. Perhaps Georges Zayed summed up Poe best:

. . .it must be acknowledged that no one knows better than Poe how to create an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and how to captivate the reader and to make him tremble with terror or with anguish, truly seizing him by his mind and senses. .  
.(91)

Whether one is reading “The Tell-Tale Heart,” or any of Poe’s sixty-eight short stories, Poe’s genius as a master story teller is forevermore.

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