“BUT WHY WILL YOU SAY THAT I AM MAD?” AMBIGUITY IN THE CONFIGURATION OF THE NARRATOR IN POE’S *THE TELL-TALE HEART*

Jade Oona Ramalho Borges

Prof.ª Dra. Genilda Azerêdo, orientadora

João Pessoa

Agosto de 2013
“BUT WHY WILL YOU SAY THAT I AM MAD?” AMBIGUITY IN THE CONFIGURATION OF THE NARRATOR IN POE’S THE TELL-TALE HEART

Monografia apresentada ao Curso de Licenciatura em Letras da Universidade Federal da Paraíba como requisito para obtenção do grau de Licenciado em Letras, habilitação em Língua Inglesa

Orientadora: Prof.ª Dr.ª Genilda Azerêdo
Borges, Jade.

“But why you say that I am mad?” ambiguity in the configuration of the narrator in Poe’s the tell-tale heart. / Jade Borges. - João Pessoa, 2013.

40 f.

Monografia (Graduação em Letras) – Universidade Federal da Paraíba - Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes.


BSE-CCHLA CDU 82-34:811.111
“BUT WHY WILL YOU SAY THAT I AM MAD?” AMBIGUITY IN THE CONFIGURATION OF THE NARRATOR IN POE’S *THE TELL-TALE HEART*

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso, aprovado como requisito parcial para obtenção do grau de Licenciado em Letras no Curso de Letras, habilitação em Língua Inglesa, da Universidade Federal da Paraíba.

Data de Aprovação:

___/___/___

Banca Examinadora:

____________________________________________
Profª Drª Genilda Azerêdo
Orientadora
Universidade Federal da Paraíba

____________________________________________
Profª Drª Gloria Maria Oliveira Gama
Universidade Federal da Paraíba

____________________________________________
Profª Drª Lucia Fatima Fernandes Nobre
Universidade Federal da Paraíba
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It derives me enormous pleasure to acknowledge the support my dear parents, Honoria and Claudemir, provided throughout my life. Thanks for teaching me the value of education. I hope I make you proud.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Profª. Drª. Genilda Azerêdo for her dedication and understanding throughout the writing of this paper. For her meticulous guidance and suggestions during the correction of this work, I am eternally grateful.

I also thank Profª. Drª. Gloria Maria and Profª. Drª. Lucia Fatima for being part of my examinee board.

I also need to thank my significant other, Hermann. Thanks for your love and inspiration, especially for being a pillar of strength to me during bad times.

I cannot forget to thank my beloved sisters, Hortênsia and Olimpia. Thanks for all the laughers, support, love and patience, particularly when I just wanted to complain.

I am also very thankful to all my friends and colleagues, for their words of encouragement when I needed the most. I would like to thank Carol, Thâssia, Camila, Severino, Josy, Karoline and also, Angélica. Thank you all for being there.
We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own.
There are no phantoms, no succubi, no weeping fountains.
There are only men…the fantastic is only one of a hundred ways of mirroring his own image.

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1943
ABSTRACT

The following research paper concerns the use of ambiguity in the configuration of the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*. After contextualizing the literary and social environment of the American Romantic Period, we offer a brief study of Poe’s poetics and of the short story as a literary genre. The analysis of the short story is supported by Todorov’s approach on the fantastic, but we also consider other literary critics’ views (such as that by Rosemary Jackson) which diverge from his more structural approach. In our analysis we try to show that Poe’s choice of an unreliable narrator contributes to the production of ambiguity; as a consequence, this feeling of hesitation, inherent to ambiguity, constitutes an essential condition for the fantastic to occur in the narrative.

Keywords: short story, ambiguity, fantastic, *The Tell-Tale Heart*
RESUMO

A monografia aqui apresentada consiste em um estudo do uso da ambiguidade na configuração do narrador em *The Tell-Tale Heart*, de Edgar Allan Poe. Após contextualizar o leitor nas esferas sociais e literárias durante o período que abrange o romantismo americano, nos deparamos com o estudo da teoria da composição de Edgar Allan Poe, bem como do estudo do conto como gênero literário. A análise do conto é embasada na teoria de Todorov sobre o fantástico, mas também discutimos outros posicionamentos de críticos que divergem da visão mais estruturalista de Todorov, como por exemplo, Rosemary Jackson. Na análise do conto, nós tentamos mostrar ao leitor que a escolha de Poe em utilizar um narrador não confiável contribui para a geração de um sentimento de ambiguidade no leitor; como consequência, essa sensação de hesitação é condição essencial para que se ocorra o fantástico na narrativa.

Palavras-chave: conto, ambiguidade, fantástico, *O Coração Delator*
SUMÁRIO

INTRODUCTION 08

CHAPTER I - Situating the American Romantic Period: A Social and Literary Context 09
  1.1- Romanticism and Literary Production in Nineteenth Century America 09
  1.2 - The Short Story as an American Literary Genre and Poe’s Poetics 11

CHAPTER II – The Fantastic as a Literary Genre 17
  2.1- Distinguishing the Gothic from the Fantastic in Connection to Poe’s Fiction 17
  2.2 - Contextualizing the fantastic 19

CHAPTER III – Ambiguity in the Configuration of the Narrator in Poe’s The Tell Tale Heart 27
  3.1 The Narrator’s Process of Telling the Story and How the Crime was performed 30
  Final Considerations 36
  References 37
INTRODUCTION

The following research paper concerns a discussion of the use of ambiguity in the configuration of the narrator in Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The hero in this short story is also the narrator, which makes room for hesitation, an essential mechanism for the fantastic to takes place.

Poe’s fiction is marked by skillfully-constructed narratives, which carefully combine the various narrative elements for the purpose of achieving a single effect. Taking into consideration Poe’s poetics and his construction of the narrator, we will understand how the fantastic is represented in *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

In Chapter One, we briefly present the Romantic Movement and the Negative Romanticism in order to contextualize Poe’s literary and social environment during the American Romantic Period. After that, we discuss the importance of Poe’s Poetics and of the short story to the American literature which was starting to take an original form. Through Poe’s theoretical work and the texts by James Cooper Lawrence and Brander Mathews, we will comprehend the structure of the short story and the features of totality and concision connected to it.

In Chapter Two, the focus is on the fantastic as a literary genre. We analyze Todorov’s approach to the fantastic literature as essential to the study of *The Tell-Tale Heart*. In this chapter, we attempt to briefly cover the view of other literary critics (such as Rosemary Jackson) that diverge from Todorov’s, whose perspective primarily regards the structural aspects of the fantastic as a literary genre.

In the analysis of the tale, we try to show that the use of ambiguity in the configuration of the narrator is an important mechanism to achieve the hesitation characteristic of the fantastic. In order to make this argument evident, we study the use of an unreliable narrator and the symbolism present in the short story, supporting our analysis with Todorov’s theory on the fantastic as well as other principles of narrative theory.
CHAPTER I - SITUATING THE AMERICAN ROMANTIC PERIOD: A SOCIAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

1.1- Romanticism and Literary Production in Nineteenth Century America\(^1\)

The American literature produced in the early 19th century was somehow in need of originality, since that was a time when literary writing was influenced by that of the Old World. It was by the years of 1850 to 1855 that America produced some fine works that helped to define what came to be considered an American literature. Works such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *Moby Dick* (1851), by Herman Melville constitute relevant examples. One can also state that the tales, essays and poems of Edgar Allan Poe greatly contributed to this innovation.

Although classifying poets by school can be reducing, it is possible to link Poe´s writing to the American Romantic period, which covers the literary and cultural movements occurring in Europe and in America approximately from 1770 to 1860. The movement originally started in Germany and from there spread to England, France and had its beginning in America by the year of 1820. The Romantic Movement includes art, philosophy, politics, music and as mentioned, literature and culture in general; thus, a simple definition of the Romantic sensibility is no simple task.

But, in broad terms, Romanticism focuses on the individual, the subjective perception and the spontaneous experience. Unlike the more classical values associated with reason and balance, the romantics rejected a more public, urban life to contemplate solitude and nature, fantasy and an exploration of one´s inner feelings. It is noteworthy to stress that paradoxical impulses also marked The Romantic Movement, in the sense that, at the same time, that there was a focus on the individual, there was also a concern with social reform. The latter can be more clearly traced as an influence of Transcendentalism, which beyond advocating the power of the individual, would also stand for Abolitionism and Women´s rights.

In America, the Romantic Movement was particularly appealing to the revolutionary moment and for those wanting to break free from the stern religious customs of the

\(^1\) For more information, see: HARVEY, Bruce. “American Romanticism Overview”. Available at:<http:www.westga.edu/~mmcfar/AMERICAN%20ROMANTICISM%20overview.htm#ftn1> Logged in March 3rd, 2012.
settlement period. This movement found an America that was thrilled with the opportunity for expansion and freedom; and a rapid growth in industrialization never seen before contributed to a feeling of patriotism. Paradoxically, the question of revolution and materialism contributed to an attitude of dissatisfaction with the problems brought on by the development of capitalism. This helped to delineate some of the main themes in American Romantic literature, drawn here from Francis E. Skipp (1992, *apud* DINÇER², 2010, p.219):

1. “Intuition (“the truth of the heart”) is more trustworthy than reason;”
2. “(...) Deeply felt experience is more valuable than universal principles;”
3. “The individual is at the center of life and God is at the center of the individual;”
4. “Nature is an array of physical symbols from which knowledge of the supernatural can be intuited;”
5. “We should aspire to the Ideal, to changing what is to what ought to be.”

Paul P. Rueben (2004) adds to this list a sort of escapist feeling and also an interest in the past, the grotesque, terror, fear and Gothicism. These are the themes that resonate the most with Poe’s tales and poems. As Morse Peckman, in his article “Towards the Theory of Romanticism” (1951) (*apud* DINÇER, 2010, p.219) states that the characters represented in “negative romanticism” experience:

A period of doubt, of despair, of religious and social isolation, of the separation of reason and the creative power, the negative romantic is able to see neither beauty nor goodness in the universe, nor any significance, nor any rationality, nor indeed any order at all, nor even evil order (PECKMAN, 1951, p.20).

These characters can also be described as plagued with cynicism, and authors in the manner of Poe and Hawthorne are fascinated with the most obscure side of human psychology; indeed, the representation of mad men is a constant feature of Poe’s work. It is possible to trace and recognize some of the characteristics of Poe’s narrators in the following statement by Peckman:

The typical symbols of negative romanticism are individuals who are filled with guilt, despair and cosmic and social alienation. They are often presented,

---

for instance, as having committed some horrible and unmentionable crime in
the past. They are outcasts from men and from God; they are almost
wanderers on the face of the earth (PECKHAM apud DINÇER 2010, p. 219).

Poe´s writing, similarly to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John William
Polidori, shares some characteristics with Gothic fiction, since it presents elements of
darkness and the supernatural and also skepticism related to man. The tormented
characters often depicted in Poe´s narratives and the hardships that surrounded Poe´s
life were contributing factors to the issue “that eulogists seized upon the romantic
outcast as a convenient symbol for Poe´s career” (WHALEN, 2001, p.63).

In the words of magazine proprietor George Graham, cited by Terence Whalen
in “Poe and the American Publishing Industry”, Poe´s difficulties and sufferings were
due to “the passionate yearnings of his soul for the beautiful and the true, which utterly
unfitted him for the rude jostlings and fierce competitorship of trade” (WHALEN, 2001,
p.63).

Behind the assumption of an accursed genius, one can acknowledge that Poe was
a visionary since being a writer in the “antebellum publishing industry transformed Poe
into one of the most innovative writers of his day, chiefly by driving him into new fields
of literary labor and by granting him startling insights into the artistic implications of
capitalist development” (WHALEN, 2001, p.64).

1.2 – The Short Story as an American Literary Genre and Poe´s Poetics

It was through his labor in the main publishing centers of America that Poe
achieved a literary reputation not just as a poet and short story writer but as an
important literary theorist and critic as well. To understand the importance of theory and
criticism to literature, and specially the American one, which was starting to take an
original form, it is pertinent to quote James Russel Lowell, in “Our Contributors³”,
when he says: “But, before we have an American literature, we must have an American
criticism.”

We can draw the conclusion that Poe´s literary criticism and theoretical
elaborations helped to establish the short story as a new valuable literary genre and of
significant importance to the construction of an American literature, which can be

corroborated by Andrew Levy´s statement: ‘If the first peculiar truth of American short story is that Edgar Allan Poe is its patron saint, then the second peculiar truth is that the genre is a purely American art form” (LEVY, 1993, p.27). The study of the short story can constitute a valuable tool for the understanding of the literary and even social development of America.

The theoretical and critical texts by Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) and the review of Nathaniel Hawthorne´s “Twice-Told Tales” (1842) are texts referred to by most critics and scholars when it comes to the study of the short story poetics, even though Poe himself never used the term. Through Poe’s own theoretical work and the texts by James Cooper Lawrence, “A Theory of the Short Story” (1917) and by Brander Mathews, “The Philosophy of the Short Story” (1971), it is possible to understand the structure of the short story and the features of totality and concision connected to it.

In constructing his tales and poems, Poe was very much concerned with the notion of poetical effect. All narrative elements should be magisterially combined for the purpose of achieving this effect. So important is this organization that Poe stated in the review⁴ of Night and Morning, a book by Edward Lytton Bulwer, that: “…plot…is that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole. It may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric” (1841, pp.197-202).

In the well-known review of “Twice told Tales”, Poe presents the effect, saying:

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect (POE, 1951, p.381).

This effect is deliberately elaborated and intends to cause a reaction or impression upon the reader, exerting control on the reader up to the dénouement; Poe defended that this should be defined before the construction of the tale, involving considerate planning from the writer:

⁴ Taken from “Graham’s Magazine, April 1841, pp. 197-202. Available at:<http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticsm/gm41be01.htm> Logged in March 3rd, 2012
Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and specially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention (POE, 1951, p.364).

In order to achieve this effect or impression, as stated before, the writer should choose his incidents carefully, with no room for unnecessary words; the elements chosen should be organized since the beginning in order to achieve totality:

If his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. 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 painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction (POE, 1951, p.381).

When Poe worked as a magazine editor, he was fully aware of the limited space he had to work with and also of the fact that if the stories could attract readers and subscribers, they would generate advertising revenue for the magazine whilst keeping costs of production down. In Pattee´s words, Poe was trying to generate “the maximum of effect with the minimum of material” (PATTEE, 1923, p.134). This constitutes an interesting example of how literary forms can be affected by economic forces.

In relation to Poe´s exaltation of the single effect and to the fact that the literary short forms were the most welcome to the writer, his tales were suitable to the fast-paced late 19th century, in which people would rarely have more than 90 minutes to the reading of fiction. One can trace back the origins of the short story format of nowadays to the rapid development of America´s industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As N. Bryllion Fagin informs in his “America Through Short Story”, America was a nation of “busy people”:

We have been a busy people, busy principally in evolving a production system supremely efficient. Railroads and factories have blossomed almost overnight; mines and oil fields have been discovered and exploited; mechanical inventions have been made and perfected by the thousand. Speed has been an essential element in our endeavors, and it has affected our lives, our very natures. Leisurely reading has been, for most Americans, impossible. As with our meals, we have grabbed bits of reading standing up, cafeteria style, and gulped down cups of sentiment on the run… (FAGIN, 1936, p.260).
It was in “The Philosophy of Composition” that Poe theorized that the reader has needs and/or limitations that should be considered by the author when constructing his work:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed (POE, 1951, p.365).

In this quotation, Poe mentions again to the importance of the effect upon the reader and also draws attention to the length a literary work should have. In order to achieve an impression or totality, the author must consider the length not to be too long, since the achievement of a certain effect can be lost if the work is too long. Certainly, the principle of length constitutes a rather subjective feature when studying what constitutes the short story. In “A Theory of the Short Story”, James Cooper Lawrence summarizes the requirements a story should have in order to fit the definition “a short story is a brief tale which can be told or read at one sitting”, by claiming that:

This definition requires two things of the story: (1) that it shall be short and (2) that it shall possess coherence sufficient to hold the reader’s or listener’s unflagging interest from beginning to end. The terms of the definition are of necessity relative. It is, of course, impossible to draw a hard and fast line and say that any story which contains less than so many hundred words is short, while a tale which contains one word more than the allotted portion is long. The personal equation entering into the problem also renders it impossible to establish any fixed measure of the degree of coherence which is required to hold a reader’s or listener’s unflagging attention (LAWRENCE, 1917, p.275).

Consequently, the definition of a short story transcends the mere question of length and unity of effect. Thus, not every literary work that is short can be considered a short story. Indeed, the suppressing of elements that would otherwise be welcome in a novel, for instance, can be a distinctive feature of the short story and more appropriate for Poe’s own work, where the tension and effect were achieved frequently with the use of terror and fantastic elements.

Poe’s ideas were not endorsed by any writer or critic in the subsequent decades after Poe’s statements on the short story poetics. It was not until Brander Matthews came along that Poe’s thoughts on the short story fiction would be settled, argues Charles May, in The Reality of Artifice (2002).
Fred Lewis Pattee in “The Development of the American Short Story: An Historical Survey” also adds to this fact:

There is no evidence in all the critical writings of the mid-century or in any of the literary correspondence of the time that a single reader in 1842 had seen Poe’s review of Hawthorne or that anyone had profited at all from the brilliant technique of his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. For a generation after his death, his tales were mentioned only as terror compelling things, strange exotics standing gruesomely alone almost to be regretted among the conventional creations of American literature (PATTEE, 1921, p.145).

In “The Philosophy of the Short-Story”, Matthews (1971) writes a comprehensive work derived from Poe’s ideas and some of his own. He defended that the short story was a genre, a branch of literature. He asserts that:

the short-story – in spite of the fact that in our language it has no name of its own —is one of the few sharply defined literary forms. It is a genre, as M, Brunetière calls it, a species, as a naturalist might call it, as individual as the Lyric itself and as various. It is as distinct an entity as the Epic, as Tragedy, as Comedy.” (MATTHEWS, 1971, p.73).

As mentioned previously, Poe never used the term short story, but instead, he refers to his works as tales, brief tales and short prose narrative. That is why Matthews tried to distinguish the term and coined it by using a hyphen to differentiate it from the story that was short just to fit in a magazine page. Frederick Lewis Pattee confirms the distinction by affirming that:

It connoted simply that for general magazine purposes fiction must be severely shortened. That the tale, or the short story, was a distinct genre, necessarily short as a lyric is necessarily short, following laws distinct from those ruling the novel and its abbreviated form the novelette, had been realized in its fullness by no one, save perhaps Poe (PATTEE, 1921, p.291).

Matthews points to the differences between the novel and the short story but not only concerning the length but by considering the short story as a genre on its own. He asserts: “A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression” (1971, p.15).

Matthews discusses the question of totality by defending that the short story deals with some specific features, such as “(...) a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation” (1971, p.16).
Matthews also emphasizes the issue of totality or effect in a short story by underlining its connection to length and Poe´s concern with it:

Poe’s paradox that a single poem cannot greatly exceed a hundred lines in length under penalty of ceasing to be one poem and breaking into a string of poems, may serve to suggest the precise difference between the Short-story and the Novel. The Short-story is the single effect, complete and self-contained, while the Novel is of necessity broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of totality, as Poe called it, unity of impression (1901, p.16).

Concerning the themes that differentiate the short story from the novel, Matthews roughly states that the novel “must be a love-tale while the short story needs not to deal with love at all” (1901, p.18). Again, this is a very arbitrary difference: the short story, he defends, would be beneficial to incorporate “a touch of fantasy” (1901, p.38). The critic Henry Seidel Canby studies the supernatural and the terror in Poe´s tales, making a parallel with the influence that the German Gothic fiction exerted on Poe. To these allegations and criticism, that commonly associated Poe´s themes with those of the German writers, Poe contested in the preface5 of Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque: “If in many of my productions terror has been the theme, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul – that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results”.

Edgar Allan Poe wanted to cause a powerful effect on his readers; that is why it is appropriate of him to tend towards the terror and the supernatural. His blood-cuddling tales often dealt with our fear through a number of subjects concerning mainly the abnormal, and more specifically, the dark corners of human mind, with its obsessions and madness.

Poe´s writings exceed the limits of Gothic fiction, reaching the genre of the fantastic. In the next chapter, we will make a differentiation between the two genres, in order to understand his writing and to clarify the meaning of ambiguity, our main aim within this paper.

---

5 Taken from “Preface,” Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840), 1:5-6. Available at: <http://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/tgap.htm> Logged in March 3rd, 2012
2.1– Distinguishing the Gothic from the Fantastic in connection to Poe´s Fiction

As observed before, Poe´s literary work has been associated to that of Gothic fiction for exploring devices that are normally depicted in Gothic stories. According to Fred Botting´s, Gothic is a “writing of excess” and violence which aimed to “shadow and display the underside of enlightenment and humanist values” from the Victorian eighteenth century (1996, p.2). These urges in Gothic fiction are represented by features that have become exemplary of the Gothic:

In Gothic fiction certain stock features provide the principal embodiments and evocations of cultural anxieties. Tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits predominate in the 18th century. Spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting heroines and bandits populate Gothic landscapes as suggestive figures of imagined and realistic threats. This list grew in the 19th century, with the addition of scientist, fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals and the monstrous double signifying duplicity and evil nature. Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace. In the 18th century they were wild and mountainous locations. Later the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic grandeur and wildness, its dark and labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest (BOTTING, 1996, p. 1).

Some of those features, like the presence of madmen, evil nature and the doubles were pioneered by Poe. Along with the use of the macabre and the supernatural, Poe uniquely left his tales unresolved, blurred with ambiguity and leaving his readers with a mystery to solve. Differently from the other Gothic writers of his time, such as Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne:

Poe´s fiction leaves boundaries between reality, illusion and madness unresolved rather than, in the manner of his contemporaries, domesticating Gothic motifs or rationalizing mysteries (BOTTING, 1996, p.78).

When analyzing Poe´s works under the previous statement, we can point that the way Poe manipulates the Gothic motifs and elements, leaving things unresolved and not explaining mysteries, makes possible to articulate his writing with the fantastic genre. To draw a clear distinction between the genres is tricky and certainly exceeds the objects of this essay. However, in order to understand the fantastic in Poe´s short stories, it is necessary to explain how the connection between the Gothic and the
fantastic works. In *The Fantastic* (1975), Todorov analyzes:

Indeed, “we generally distinguish, within the literary Gothic, two tendencies: that of the supernatural explained (the ‘uncanny’), as it appears in the novels of Clara Reeves and Ann Radcliffe; and that of the supernatural accepted (the ‘marvellous’), which is characteristic of the works of Horace Walpole, M. G. Lewis, and Maturin (1975, p.42).

According to Todorov, there is no fantastic in none of these tendencies because the stories are rationalized or they are beyond rationalization. Doubt is an essential condition for the fantastic, according to Todorov. The reader, when confronted with the abnormal and the uncanny finds himself in a position where he can admit that event, as being possible or not; the fantastic lies within this hesitation. The definition for the fantastic is stated by Todorov thus:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of the two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (1975, p.25).

The person who experiences the event in the fantastic, in Poe’s writing, is usually materialized as a first-person narrator. This interaction of the narrator with the reader is one of Poe’s main concerns. Thus, we can posit that Poe’s fiction displays a tension between the Gothic and the Fantastic. In some of his tales, such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and *The Black Cat* (1845), we can find the limits between reality and unreality blurred: the supernatural becomes entwined with reality, and together with the ambiguity also present, they are fundamental to the existence of the fantastic.
2.2 Contextualizing the fantastic

The word fantastic\(^6\) comes from the Latin, phantasticus (imaginary) which is derived from the Greek phantastikós (able to present or show and also related to phantázein, to make visible.), meaning in short, to relate directly to the imaginative faculty—distancing from our own reality and getting closer to a different reality, where its laws are not familiar to us.

According to Rosemary Jackson, “in this general sense, all imaginary activity is fantastic, all literary works are fantasies. Given such infinite scope, it had proved difficult to develop an adequate definition of fantasy as a literary kind” (1981, p.9).

The fantastic, depending on the point of view, can be understood as a genre, mode or language. For Todorov, the fantastic is a genre situated between two other sub-genres, the marvelous and the uncanny. Rosemary Jackson supports the idea of the fantastic as “a literary mode from which a number of related genres emerge (1981, p.5)”. Rosalba Campra\(^7\) coins it as an “isotope of transgression” where language is subverted in different ways.

Fantasy as a literary term has been given to any literary work that does not present a realistic representation; this definition includes: myths, legends, fairy tales, detective story, horror stories, science fiction etc. All of these works of literature introduce us to a realm that is not our own and somehow, include a disturbing factor, meaning to “disturb” the realistic representations in literature. That is a function that Rosemary Jackson calls subversive function in her *Fantasy: the literature of subversion* (1981). She cites Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1984) in which he situates the works of writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allan Poe as coming from a genre that existed in Christian, Byzantine, Medieval and Renaissance writings: the menippea.

---


\(^7\) For more information, see: A Superior Magic: Literary Politics and the Rise of the Fantastic in Latin American Fiction. Available at: <http://languages.usf.edu/faculty/data/FantasticLiterature.pdf> Logged in September 3rd, 2012
The menippea easily disturbed realism and probability by representing in its fiction violations of what was considered etiquette and accepted behavior. Rosemary Jackson states:

The menippea moved easily in space between this world, an underworld and an upper world. It conflated past, present and future, and allowed dialogues with the dead. States of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behavior and speech, personal transformation, extraordinary situations, were the norm (1981, p.8).

In general, the fantastic has this function of blurring the limits of what is considered to be real and of what is imagination. The fantastic narrative, through a number of artifacts, questions what is considered to be the norm and dissolves “(…) spatial, temporal, and philosophical ordering systems” (JACKSON, 1981 p. 15).

Literary critics in general, when discussing the fantastic, agree to disagree. The confusion starts in terminology. The fantastic as we now know used to have multiple literary terms applied to it. Terms such as Gothic fiction, supernatural fiction, ghost story, weird tale, fantasy, and horror fiction were used interchangeably. The literary critic Rosemary Jackson (1981) presents fantasy and the fantastic as interchangeable terms. Steiner (2007, p.5) maintains that apart from France, no serious study of the fantastic was carried on until the 1970s.

According to Bernd Steiner (2007), the fantastic, as a literary term, originated from the French “le fantastique” and as a literary genre proved to be valued there, whereas in other countries the fantastic was dismissed and considered to be of minor importance. We can draw a parallel with Edgar Allan Poe’s own history. It was in France that his works were held in high esteem by most of the French writers; due to the translations of his tales and poems by Baudelaire and Mallarmé respectively, Poe’s contribution to literary theory was recognized and has influenced many authors along the years. Poe’s poetics introduced the idea of unity of impression and the active role of the reader, and all of these are to be found in fantastic stories. Poe also defended that the tale was the most appropriate form to exert an effect upon the reader, which is why the short story is such a common genre to represent the fantastic. According to Todorov, as long as the hesitation is present, the fantastic occurs. This hesitation, however, cannot be maintained for long.
Tzvetan Todorov wrote the influential *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975), where he defended a rather structural approach to the study of the fantastic. The studies of the fantastic which came after his are much in debt to him since this was the first serious critical study conducted on the fantastic. It is important to consider, in addition, that Todorov´s approach is also polemic. Rosemary Jackson considers that his book is not complete in its view, since it excludes Psychoanalysis. She claims that:

> Fantasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material that it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts. Yet Todorov repudiates Freudian theory as inadequate or irrelevant when approaching the fantastic (JACKSON, 1981, p.4).

The psychological and psychoanalytical approaches in their most basic form attempt to read fantastic literature as a means to, in a certain way, analyze the writer´s psyche, often taking into consideration the author’s biographical information. Many of Poe´s writings have been approached in this way, his narrators were frequently linked to his persona. The themes of the fantastic have, in general, become the themes for psychological research. Todorov mentions the study of the double (Otto Rank´s *Der Doppelgänger*) and the theme of the devil in Ernest Jone´s *The Connections Between the Nightmare and Certain Medieval Superstitions* (1975, p.161). In “The Uncanny” (1919), Freud discusses the uncanny feeling, “which creates horror by making a person feel extremely uncomfortable with a situation, impression, objects or event” (Freud apud BECK, 2005, p.2). Freud first analyzes the term uncanny in its original German form, the “unheimlich”. This term means “not familiar”, since Heim means home, a place to feel safe. Whereas “unheimlich” means “not homely”. It is possible to understand that in fantastic literature, the uncanny events represented aim to produce an effect on the reader, fear being the most commonly feeling associated with this literary genre. Considering that, we can conclude that somehow the themes of the fantastic are very much connected to those of psychoanalysis, as mentioned before. Freud himself tried to penetrate Hoffmann´s mind by analyzing “Der Sandmann” connecting the events in the tale with Hoffmann´s biography. This type of thematic criticism might be very reducing, since according to Todorov, “we are interested in literature and literature alone” (1975, p.151); of course, there are exceptions. There are cases where the author’s personal life reflects his own work more explicitly, but in order for this fact be
considered relevant, “this relation must be given as one of the features of the work itself” (TODOROV, 1975, p.151). Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Fantastic* (1975), draws the conclusions on what is the fantastic by connecting it to the abnormal notion and intrusion of the uncanny in real life:

Castex, in *Le Conte Fantastique en France*, writes: “The fantastic…is characterized… by a brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life.” Louis Vax, in *L’Art et la Littérature Fantastiques:* “The fantastic narrative generally describes men like ourselves, inhabiting the real world, suddenly confronted by the inexplicable.” Roger Caillois, in *Au Coeur du Fantastique*: The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality” (p.26).

The intrusion of the supernatural or mystery in real life is seen by Malrieu with the mere function to provide as a symbol or metaphor, a larger reality. Malrieu states that the genre of the fantastic requires the presence of a character and a disturbing element that can be represented by the supernatural or not and can also be characterized by hallucinations, madness and the abnormal manifestations which can disturb character and reader’s balance (Malrieu apud PHILIPPOV, 1999, p.47).

From 1800 onwards and the beginning of late 18th century, the fantastic originated within a capitalist economy and as a result, represented in fiction the effects of living in a materialistic society. Italo Calvino (1983) supports the notion that the fantastic narrative was born within the Gothic and its representations of the macabre, cruelty and terror. Calvino also emphasizes the importance of Hoffmann in shaping the fantastic tale from the 19th century, which meant to represent the subjective reality of the mind and imagination, giving to it an importance equivalent or even greater to that of the real life. In “Fantastic Tales: Visionary and Everyday” (1983), Italo Calvino chooses “Der Sandmann” (1816) as obligatory to understand the German fantastic.

In the mentioned anthology, Calvino stresses that we cannot resume the fantastic to a mere use of “fantastic elements” (CALVINO, 1983, p.6). Although essential, one cannot generalize. There is another type of fantastic: the everyday fantastic, a term Calvino coined. This other fantastic is more mental, psychological and employs minimal elements to create tension, whereas the more traditional fantastic is more “felt” than “seen” (CALVINO, 1983, p.6).
Edgar Allan Poe is an avatar of these two branches. Ítalo Calvino categorizes the fantastic in visionary fantastic (“fantastic visionario”) and everyday fantastic (“fantastico mentale or cotidiano”). The first one frequently includes supernatural features such as phantoms and monsters, themes common to the Gothic narrative. On the other hand, the everyday fantastic focuses on an interior dimension, a mental dimension, where the supernatural is invisible and completely psychological. To illustrate these branches, he chooses two tales by Poe: “The Fall of the House of Usher” as example of the former definition and “The Tell-Tale Heart” as an example of the latter.

H.P. Lovecraft’s definition of fantastic fiction emphasized the value of constructing a fantastic atmosphere in order to cause certain reactions on the reader; the most important one being caused by terror and fear of the unknown. Fear, in H.P. Lovecraft’s words:

> (...) is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions. Horror and the unknown or the strange are always closely connected, so that it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or “outsideness” without laying stress on the emotion of fear. (LOVECRAFT )

The criterion defended by Lovecraft for the fantastic takes place within the experience and impression brought to the reader, through the work itself. Todorov stresses that the reactions are caused not on “the reader implicit in the text, but the actual person holding the book in his hand (1975, p.34).” H.P. Lovecraft states the importance of atmosphere when constructing the fantastic:

> Atmosphere is most important, for the ultimate criterion of authencity [of the fantastic] is not plot structure but the creation of a specific impression…Hence we must judge the fantastic tale not so much by the author’s intentions and the mechanisms of the plot, but by the emotional intensity it provokes… A tale is fantastic if the reader experiences an emotion of profound fear and terror, the presence of unsuspected worlds and powers (apud TODOROV, 1975, p.34).

Todorov argues that fear is commonly associated with the fantastic but this is not an essential condition for the fantastic genre. Furthermore, Todorov, in *The Fantastic*...
(1975) proposes a definition of the fantastic where doubt is essential to the fantastic. The reader experiences an event but this event may or may not cause fear, thus the heart of his definition is the impression caused by hesitation. The event aforementioned can have or not an explanation and this feeling of ambiguity is expressed by the following dichotomies: reality or dream? Truth or illusion?

The reader of the fantastic narrative is required to take an active role while reading; the reader has to deal with the dilemma of believing or not believing. The presence of the first-person narrator is common in fantastic literature. This feature provides a process of identification of the reader with the character. The pronoun “I” is uttered by everyone, however, this identification process, Todorov explains, does not have a “psychological function”; instead, it constitutes “a mechanism internal to the text (1975, p. 84). However, we can argue that the use of “I” is a mechanism that does have a “psychological function” since it automatically inflicts upon the reader experiences of fear and hesitation.

Edgar Allan Poe has made an extensive use of this mechanism in his tales, where the hero of the story is the narrator as well, the one who makes room for hesitation, thus making his discourse be likely to be doubted by the reader:

(...) because [the first-person narrator characters] are not introduced by a discourse distinct from that of the narrator, we still lend them a paradoxical confidence. We are told that the narrator is lying, and the possibility that he is lying shocks us “structurally”; but this possibility exists - since he is also a character- and hesitation is thereby generated in the reader (TODOROV, 1975, p.86).

The discourse of the narrator in the fantastic tales is therefore, ambiguous. Its discourse, unlike the characters’, “lies outside the test of truth” whereas the characters must pass the test (TODOROV, 1975, p.86).

Todorov also discusses what he called the integration of the reader with the characters of the fantastic narrative; the reader in this case is a kind of narrator himself, who feels hesitation and doubt and these impressions must be concomitant to those of the characters in the tale:

The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated. It must be noted that we have in mind no actual reader, but the role of the reader implicit in the text. The perception of
this implicit reader is given in the text, with the same precision as the movements of the characters (1975, p.31).

The fantastic takes place as long as the narrative maintains its reader in doubt and experiencing hesitation. This impression is, as a consequence, noted to be evanescent. It is here that lies the fantastic, in this moment of hesitation. For Todorov, the fantastic is a genre that borders two other genres: the uncanny and the marvelous. What differentiates them are respectively, the possibility of an explanation and the entertaining of the supernatural event as true. The reader, again, takes the role of deciding which is which. Todorov concludes that the fantastic “leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment (1975, p.41).

From genres mentioned previously, two sub-genres derive: the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvelous. Here we represent these sub-divisions through the diagram below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>uncanny</th>
<th>fantastic-uncanny</th>
<th>fantastic-marvelous</th>
<th>marvelous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The uncanny (TODOROV, 1975, p.47) achieves as its main distinguishing feature, one of the conditions of the fantastic: the description of the character’s response, particularly the feeling of fear. The uncanny is related to reaction and not to material event. The sub-genre of the fantastic-uncanny (p.44) is critically labeled as “the supernatural explained”. All the supernatural events here pictured are rationally explained at the end of the reading. As for the fantastic-marvelous (p.52), the nature of the events is the closest to those of the fantastic, for it causes hesitation. However, at the end, such events are accepted⁹ as belonging to the supernatural. In the marvelous (p.53) sub-genre, the supernatural events are not meant to cause any reaction in the characters or in the implicit reader. The marvelous relies solely on the nature of the events depicted. Todorov states that the fantastic in its pure form is situated between the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvelous, where the hesitation or fear is sustained and the events described do not culminate to a sense of closure, i.e., the events are not explained in any way.

⁹ (TODOROV, 1975, p.52, grifo nosso)
Todorov maintains that the fantastic is not present in Poe’s fiction, except for “The Black Cat”. Todorov classifies Poe’s tales as deriving from the uncanny and the marvelous. Contradictorily, Todorov states: “Yet Poe remains very close to the authors of the fantastic both in his themes and in the techniques that he applies” (1975, p.48).

Todorov himself admitted that the fantastic “leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment (1975, p.41). It is inevitable to contest this affirmation when it is a known fact that Poe’s writing is multilayered, holding meanings that are mainly symbolic and even allegoric. To corroborate the argument of the evanescent quality of the fantastic, we will use Jean Paul Sartre’s essay *Aminadab* (or *The Fantastic Considered as a Language*) (1943). Through literature, especially when dealing with fantasy, it is possible to “transcend the human” (p.58), which comes from a long way since man used various means to escape his human condition, such as “asceticism, mysticism, metaphysical disciplines or the practice of poetry (…)” (p.58). Sartre ascertains that if the reader explains the protagonist’s psychotic behavior as deriving from some sort of madness, the fantastic is lost. But if the supernatural or “absurd manifestations” (p.61) appear as expected, we see ourselves as readers at the center of the fantastic.
CHAPTER III – AMBIGUITY IN THE CONFIGURATION OF THE NARRATOR IN POE’S THE TELL-TALE HEART

The short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* was originally published in January, 1843 in the first issue of *The Pioneer* magazine. Its final version was reprinted with minor changes in the Broadway Journal, 1845. *The Tell-Tale Heart* tells the story of an unnamed first-person narrator who delivers a speech insisting he is sane despite of being “dreadfully nervous” (POE, 1951, p.244). In fact, he states that the nervous disease produced a positive side effect: his senses became acute, the hearing especially. He lives with an old man who has a pale blue “vulture eye”, which makes the narrator extremely upset, distressing him so much that he plans to murder the old man. Paradoxically, the narrator states that he loves the old man but his Evil Eye. The narrator insists that his sagacity and skillful planning of the murder is the evidence that he is sane. The narrator obsessively, for seven nights, tries “to do the work” (p.244) but the old man’s eye was closed. On the eighth night he decides to use a lamp, which shines out a ray of light directly upon the old man’s eyes; he is sitting on his bed during the whole time. The beating of the old’s man heart triggers the narrator, who attacks the old man using the bed as a weapon and ends up killing him. The narrator hides the dismembered pieces of the body under the floorboards. A shriek is heard; in consequence, the police knock at the narrator’s door. The police officers look round the house and do not suspect anything. However, the narrator starts listening to a ringing in his ears, making him very uncomfortable. He then perceives that the noise is coming from the floorboards; that is in fact, the old man’s heartbeat. Moved by his own fear of the heartbeat and concluding that the officers suspect him as they are aware of the noise as well, the narrator confesses the deed, asking them vehemently to reveal the concealed body.

*The Tell-Tale Heart* comprises the elements that Poe discussed in his Poetics. Those elements when carefully combined would result in a skillfully-constructed tale. The initial consideration was on the length, since to achieve the effect of *totality*, the brief tale would be the most appropriate, enabling the author “to carry out his full design without interruption. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (POE, 1951, p.381). Poe concluded that the writer cannot have this control for long, since it is impossible to maintain the mind in an excited state of mind, psychologically speaking. This control exerted on the reader refers uniquely to the intended effect during the process of reading, and according to Poe, the most effective
way is to consider that “brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect” (POE, 1951, p.366). Poe used in “The Philosophy of Composition” his poem “The Raven” (1845) as an example to illustrate his ideas on construction. Despite the fact that Poe designed his principles around a poem, they can be successfully applied to his tales. In Poe’s literary style, one cannot dissociate his fiction from his theory.

The intended effect, according to Poe, should be planned right at the beginning of writing. All the events in the composition should be designed with mathematical precision to attain the effect in the first sentence. Otherwise, the writer has “committed a blunder” (POE, 1951, p.381).

In accordance with his principles, Poe did not commit a blunder in writing the short story *The Tell-Tale Heart*. All of the elements in this narrative contribute to the creation of an effect upon the implicit reader, which leaves him hesitating when faced with the ambiguity mainly derived from the narrator. In this short story, all the elements and events are combined to entrap the reader in a world where the limits between reality and illusion are not clearly set. In this subversive fiction, the reader finds himself in a dilemma: to believe or not to believe? This doubt is at the very core of the fantastic. The reader experiences an event but this event may or may not cause fear, thus the heart of Todorov’s definition of the fantastic is the impression caused by hesitation.

In fantastic literature, it is common to find the use of the first-person unreliable narrator. The hero of Poe’s tales is also frequently the narrator and the same narrator gives us a first-hand account of an event that happened to him. By telling the events from memory, in a different time and place from that of the event he accounts, the narrator is free to distort his memories, deliberately or not. To the reader, there is always a possibility that the discourse he/she is reading is nothing but a tall tale, which means a tale that contains unbelievable elements told as being true facts and that usually brings a first-person narrator. In other words, the narrator’s discourse is likely to be doubted by the reader:

(…) because [the first-person narrators] are not introduced by a discourse distinct from that of the narrator, we still lend them a paradoxical confidence. We are told that the narrator is lying, and the possibility that he is lying shock us “structurally”; but this possibility exists - since he is also a character- and hesitation is thereby generated in the reader. (TODOROV, 1975, p.86)
The discourse of the narrator in the fantastic tales is therefore, ambiguous. Its discourse, unlike the characters’, “lies outside the test of truth” whereas the characters must pass the test (TODOROV, 1975, p.86).

We can see the question of ambiguity in the *The Tell-Tale Heart* noticeably related to its narrator, who all the time tries to convince the reader that he is sane but his actions show quite the opposite. Right in the first sentence, Poe tried to achieve the desired effect:

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, 1951, p.244).

First of all, we can see that the narrator contradicts himself, which is a clear sign of an unreliable narration. The narrator clearly confuses a sharp mind with sharp senses. An acute sense of hearing is what frequently haunts the mind of a madman.

And I have not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses? Now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. 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 (POE, 1951, p.246).

The sounds in the narrator’s ear and the heartbeat of the old man, constitute a crescendo that ultimately forces such a tension in the narrator that forces him to speak vehemently and to make gestures in a theatrical way:

No doubt I now grew very pale; but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased – and what could I do? It was low, dull, quick sound-much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath – and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations … (POE, 1951, p.247)
The Narrator’s Process of Telling the Story and How the Crime was performed

The narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is an autodiegetic narrator, which derives from the homodiegetic narrator. Genette differentiates between two types of narrators in the narrative in relation to its presence while he/she is recounting:

We will therefore distinguish here two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from the story he tells […], the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells […]. I call the first type, for obvious reasons, heterodiegetic, and the second type homodiegetic” (1980, p.244-245).

Moreover, if the homodiegetic narrator is also the hero of the story, we have therefore, according to Genette (1980), an autodiegetic narrator. As readers, we only have the narrator’s account to have access to the narrative. David R. Saliba (1980) maintains that the reader “is led through the story by the narrator with no sense of reality other than what the narrator has to say”. As mentioned earlier in the text, this feature of narration forces the reader to identify himself with the character. Saliba’s perspective fails to encompass a more hermeneutic dimension, for, according to TUCKER (2003), since in the fantastic, its shocking events unbalance the readers’ position, can’t we expect that they naturally claim their balance back? That is, TUCKER (2003) argues “that these stories frequently include detectives, inspectors, and others who simply want to solve the mysteries that confront them” (2003, p.4). One can contest Saliba’s “no sense of reality” affirmation by confronting it with Bynum’s remark on how “all audiences bring to a work of literature some frame of reference that exists outside the text” (2009, p.69). In the presence of the fantastic, the reader is destabilized by the supernatural and naturally brings to the literary text its outside reference.

Let us take as an example the “moral insanity” disease in the 1840s, where a defendant could have his legal responsibility reviewed by claiming “moral insanity”. Poe was a trial reporter in the trial of James Woods (2003, p.72), and the reader can assume that this murder caused by moral insanity was the inspiration for some of his literary creation. The narrator’s monologue in *Tell-Tale Heart* can be seen not only as a confession but also as a defense. In the *Tell-Tale Heart*, he does not intend to prove his innocence but in fact, his sanity. John McElroy says of the narrator in *The Black Cat* that the tale brings “two simultaneous perspectives: the narrative and the authorial” (p.144, 2009). The latter is also true to the narrator of the *Tell-Tale Heart*. The author and also narrator brings limited persuasive explanations and appeals in order to convey
his accounting of the horrible events. Although the narrators have much room for instigating doubt on the reader, these two narrators fall short from their arguments, and this is, in reality, their punishment. Through his monologue, the narrator is successful in revealing the evidences of his madness. The rhetorical questions asked by the narrator contradict his so called calm manner in the telling of the story.

The use of “sharp exclamations, nervous questions, and broken sentences” (GARGANO, 1963, p.167) by the protagonist to prove him sane only reinforces the idea that he is really insane. While describing how he committed the crime, there is a conspicuous and repetitive use of adverbs of manner, which gives the impression that the narrator is convinced that the implicit reader will doubt him, and thus he needs to justify his precision as a sign of his sanity:

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little — a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it — you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length, a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye (POE, 1951, p.246).

The characterization of the Tell-Tale Heart’s hero is very subjective due to the fact that all the information we get comes through the narrator’s own point of view. Through his characterization, we can detect his monomaniac and paranoid manner. The narrator tries hard to prove him sane by telling how cunningly and stealthily he committed murder. The narrator’s discourse is filled with inconsistencies. He defines himself as someone of great intelligence, sagacity, caution and undoubtedly sanity. To the reader, his speech contradicts his actions. At the beginning, he admits being dreadfully nervous, suffering from a disease that had sharpened his senses. Right after, the narrator demands the “you” to observe how healthily and calmly he can tell the story. Another source of ambiguity is the absence of a plausible motive for the crime:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. 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 (POE, 1951, p.244).

He rationally explains that he is not mad; his act of committing the murder shows how systematic and precise he was, but the lack of motive spoils this rationality. The precision of the murder contradicts the murder. On the other hand, precise and
systematic behavior, when related to crimes, is a revealing trace of psychopathic personality. Poe had a different view on madness; his view can be illustrated by the following remark: “Science has not yet told us whether madness may not be the sublime form of intelligence (POE apud TODOROV, 1975, P.39). For Emily Dickinson (1862), “Much Madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye —” stating ironically and wittily new definitions of what madness and sense are; alongside instigating a reflection on social conformity.

The narrator states that he loved the old man but had to kill him anyway, in order to get rid of the eye since it was a “vulture eye”. The poor elderly man probably had cataract, hardly a reason for murder. He says that he “was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him” (POE, 1951, p.245). This demonstrates such an irony and irrational behavior; adding to that, the fact that he later said he “pitied” the old man, just to have this sympathetic feeling undermined by the statement: “[…] I chuckled at heart (p.246).” These chuckles and smiles are completely paradoxical to his actions; actually it seems the narrator takes a cruel pleasure from his deeds. The narrator tells the story in a mode of confession, as if he were in conversation with someone we do not know whom. Judging from the context, we can infer he is talking to a judge, which explains the great need for detail. Therefore, the confessional mode is used to indicate a relevant evidence of insanity:

Not that every man who confesses a murder is to be considered insane, but, by this, taken along with other circumstances, as when the individual . . . attempts to give reasons for the propriety of his conduct, we have a strong indication . . . of the deranged condition of the intellect (WATSON apud BYNUM, 1832, p.47).

The narrator shows a sort of sympathy towards the old man when he says:

I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it was welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart (POE, 1951, p.246).

Poe gives the narrator the chance to unburden his secrets, so we know that “he lives in a haunted and eerie world of his own demented making” (GARGANO, 1963, p.167). This feeling of terror connects him to his victim and also to ourselves, since the uncanny, for Freud, is that primitive feeling that “derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but--on the contrary--from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it” (FREUD apud SANDNER,
The feeling of terror, somehow makes us feel more connected and inclined to identify ourselves more with the old man in the tale than with the first-person narrator, whose process of identification, as stated by Todorov, constitutes mere “mechanism internal to the text” (1975, p. 84). Except that, it is impossible not to link this fear to the symbolism of the “death watches in the wall”; that the narrator heard “night after night”. John E. Reilly\textsuperscript{10} associates the superstition of death watch beetle to the sounds it produces as to “hold to presage the death of someone in the house where they are heard”. Freud stated that this fear of death is intrinsic to every human being:

Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts....There is scarcely any other matter, however, upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as our relation to death. Two things account for our conservatism: the strength of our original emotional reaction to death and the insufficiency of our scientific knowledge about it. Biology has not yet been able to decide whether death is the inevitable fate of every living being or whether it is only a regular but yet perhaps avoidable event in life (FREUD, 1919, p.13).

Another important symbol for the tale is that of the eye. The narrator says the old man has a “vulture eye”. Horace states that “death circles on black wings”; according to Michael Ferber (1999), the vulture is one of the three beasts of battle, alongside with the eagle and raven. The vulture is, then, always waiting for the slaughter, preying on the dead; if the old man is a person like vulture, we cannot tell, but death is what he means to the narrator. The eye represented is almost an object, an exterior one, for the narrator says that what annoys him is not the old man but his Evil Eye. The fear of the Evil Eye is “one of the most uncanny and widespread forms of superstition” (FREUD, 1919, p.16). To cast an evil look upon somebody means to have the power to give a look that will cause harm or bad luck, for reason of envy or for dislike. Another form of the superstition states that the Evil Eye can bestow a curse upon the victim. This can leave us wondering if the narrator could possibly be under the curse of a malevolent gaze, which led him to murder. Along with the superstition point of view, there is also the possibility, as pointed out by Arthur Robinson, that the dreaded “evil eye” is as matter of fact, the “Evil I”, which results in the madmen being reflected in that eye and consequently, recoiling in horror from the sight which stares at

\textsuperscript{10} Taken from The Lesser Death-Watch and “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Available at:<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/jer19691.htm> Logged in September 3rd, 2012.
him (ROBINSON apud BYNUM, 1971, p.101). The reflection and consequently the gaze of a sane man can “easily terrify and compose” an insane man whose reason is possessed by the one who stares at him (RUSH apud BYNUM, 1830, P.173). The eye and the heartbeat, as mentioned earlier in the text, constitute a crescendo in the story. The tale the narrator tells should end when he states after checking that he “was stone dead” (p.245), that the old man’s eye would no longer trouble him. But the mentioned beat is a metonymic symbol for the heart, since it is the very heart which will lead to the narrator’s defeat in trying to hide the deed from the police officers. The tattoo of the heart is a dead giveaway of his desire to express away his guilt. The narrator says he “(…) talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness – until, at length, I found that the noise was within my ears (POE, 1951, p.274)”. The confession, resulted from the two mentioned elements, and its cathartic quality are stronger in the end than his need to hide the actual murder, since in his own words, anything was better than the agony he felt:

(…) Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men – but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! What could I do? I foamed, I raved, I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. I grew louder – louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! No, no! They heard, they suspected! They knew! They were making a mockery of my horror! This I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! -And now – again! Hark! Louder! Louder! Louder! Louder! – “Villains! I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!” (POE, 1951, p.247).

It is ironic that the narrator at first projected his feelings of terror upon his victim and then “chuckled at heart” (p.246). And now, as shown above in the tale, his heart and the heart of his victim connected both through his punishment.

The psychological explanations blend well with the setting that makes both reader and narrator enclosed in the madness. The fantastic narrative uses a number of elements in order to achieve an effect. All the elements in this short story are meticulously combined and the use of an autodiegetic narrator in Tell-Tale Heart adds to the feeling of hesitation and doubt that is characteristic of the fantastic. Along with the symbolism, which can give an explanation or not, rational or supernatural, it all depends on the reader, to accept that or not. Therefore, there is a constant air of
ambiguity in the story derived mainly from the narrator’s behavior; the supernatural is explained then, by the reader, as caused on by madness.
FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The fantastic narrative uses a number of elements in order to generate hesitation upon the implicit reader. Poe’s fiction is very much concerned with the construction of a single effect and the exploitation of the active role of the reader. These aspects, as we have seen, are to be found in the fantastic.

It is clear, therefore, that the use of an autodiegetic narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* leaves the readers in doubt, mainly because of the ambiguity that it is generated from the narrator’s discourse. The reader’s hesitation is the first condition for the fantastic to take place.

By studying the tale’s symbolism, the stylistic devices and the unreliable narrator, we come to the conclusion that the elements are all combined to reach the short story’s *dénouement*, which can give or not an explanation to the events the reader experiences through the narrator’s account. If the reader accepts what he has read in the tale as belonging to the supernatural, we enter in realm of the marvelous. Otherwise, if the reader finds a rational explanation to the event, we are dealing with the uncanny.

To sum up, in *The Tell-Tale Heart* the reader is responsible to decide whether or not to believe in what the narrator is telling him/her. Poe’s use of the supernatural and the presence of a madman in his tale leaves the reader with a mystery to solve, and concomitant to the ambiguity of these devices, there is also the uniqueness with which Poe dealt with the limits between reality, illusion and madness and how blurred he kept these boundaries. To escape the boundaries of reality, is intrinsic to the nature of men.
REFERENCES


