



The Voice of An Unsound Mind: A Psychological Analysis on Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*

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Abstract

In Mathematics there are two types of numbers known as 'real' and 'imaginary'. Both of them are addressed collectively as 'Complex numbers'. Father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud applied this term to address the collection of human emotions, buried or unstructured memories and many more various personalities of a mind. In this case, this research article is about to focus on the craving voice of an unsound mind of an unnamed narrator from Edgar Allen Poe's short story The Tell-Tale Heart. Humans have evolved so far from uncivilized to civilized ones. But the core emotions have never adapted to this so-called evolved society. Always some conflicts exist such as Man vs Man, Man vs Wild, and Man vs his psyche. It might take another million years to attain the perfect psyche like the holy angels and the son of god. One of the short stories of Edgar Allen Poe talks about the imperfect psyche of a person who assumes himself as a man of perfect sanity. For a weird reason, his 'Id' is driving him to perform a cold-blooded murder. This paper analyses the psychological elements behind the structure of that insane character based on 'Psychodynamic theory' which is very familiar from the Freudian school. It is a great wonder how Poe observed the force of 'Id', 'Ego' and 'Super ego' in this short story before Sigmund Freud published his works based on psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Psychodynamics, Psychoanalysis, Unconsciousness, Freud, Edger Allen Poe.

Introduction

In American literature, there is a unique place for Edgar Allen Poe to represent genres like horror, psychological thriller and detective stories. This is why he is addressed as the 'Father of Detective stories'. He was born on January 19 in the year 1809 and left this world on October 7, 1849. A notable writer in American literature especially in the age of 'Romanticism'. It is right to call this 'Dark Romanticism'. Initially, in his literary career, Poe started to write and publish poems. In the year 1827, his first poetry collection *Tamerlane and Other Poems* was published. Poe was not recognized at that time. But the force of fortune knocked on Poe's door in 1843 through a famous short story *The Gold Bug*. For this contribution, Poe received a great profit which was \$100 which was huge cash in the 19th century. Apart from this contribution, around the world, Poe is remembered through his iconic poem *The Raven* for its unique mysticism. The chosen short story of this paper *The*



Tell-Tale Heart was published in the year 1843 in the magazine 'The Pioneer'. This short story consists of two major characters. Both of them are introduced as nameless, so the narrator and the murderer of this story are constructed as unnamed narrators. This research paper approaches this unnamed character with the application of psychodynamic theory. This theory is a contribution from Freud and his beloved followers such as Carl Jung, Melanie Klein, Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson and Anna Freud. This psychodynamic is a byproduct of Freud's Psychoanalysis. Unlike psychoanalysis, psychodynamic is used as a therapy for mentally disordered patients. Freud and his followers agreed on the influence of the unconscious mind on human behaviour.

Being human we are aware of the things which happen around us. It happens through consciousness whereas some unnoticed or unobserved things of the conscious mind are recorded in the subconscious mind. These records are reproduced in the form of dreams. But the role of the subconscious mind is quite different. Charles Brenner explains the subtle thread between the state of awareness and dreaming.

We should realize that this difference between sleep and waking life is one of degree rather than one of a kind. It is true that during sleep an element of the repressed has a better chance of becoming conscious than it has during waking life, but, as we have seen, in many dreams the ego's defences introduce or compel such a high degree of distortion and disguise during the dream work that the access of the repressed to consciousness is hardly a very direct one in those cases (p. 166)

Unfulfilled feelings take birth as dreams to attribute a satisfactory status to an unsettled mind. However, some personalities fail to defend their 'Id' with their 'Super ego'. Like a drug-addicted person, these personalities get satisfaction through the pain of others. In their realm, there is no culture, emotion or compassion. They are free from guilty conscious. They are neither afraid of sin nor righteousness. Poe has constructed a character in this short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* like king Nero. In this short story, Poe has not taken any flashback story for this character to explain his psychological development from his childhood. However, many psychiatrists support that some suppressed emotions of a child could alter the growth of character in future. Readers may assume that this unnamed character might have been brought up in some spoiled atmosphere.

David P Celani says this in his article *A Structural Analysis of the Obsessional Character: A Fairbairnian Perspective*, "Once the bad object is internalized, it poses a new threat to the developing personality of the child because of the presence of malice, hate, or memories of neglect that accompany the object into his inner world". This unnamed character takes the life of an old man because of his 'Vulture eyes'. Beyond any vengeance and personal conflicts, this character is led by the dark force of the 'Id' to attain peace cruelly. This is why his psyche is identified as an unsound mind in this paper.

The Voice of an Unsound Mind

Inside the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were placed with a sound mind and sound body. However, the curiosity of Eve and Adam made them in absent mindset and dragged both of them into the bottomless pit. Sometimes it would happen to normal people and these



types of accidents would become a lifelong lessons in their remaining life. There are thousands of examples for the Men who had sound and unsound minds like Jesus Christ and Judas. Here in this short story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the unnamed narrator is identified as a man of unsound mind through his inner voice. “I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. Listen! Listen, and I will tell you how it happened. You will see, you will hear how healthy my mind is.”(Poe 64). Readers could understand the psyche of this character from these lines. This is to introduce the mental condition of the speaker to the readers. From the opening, the author tries to project this character as a harmful creature. Gradually Poe establishes the unsound mind of this madman through the appearance of his neighbour who has weird eyes. “I even loved him. He had never hurt me. I did not want his money. I think it was his eye. His eye was like the eye of a vulture, the eye of one of those terrible birds that watch and wait while an animal dies, and then fall upon the dead body and pull it to pieces to eat it.” (Poe 64). In his perspective, these eyes ignite a never-ending flame of urge which mysteriously drives his ‘Id’ to kill that old man. This is the weird ground of this story that proves that there are few people in this world with this type of imbalanced mental status.

This condition of mind is merely like an imaginary inferno with never-ending screams of suffering souls. This unnamed character’s unsound mind is trapped in a delusion that has made him believe the old man’s eyes as ‘evil eyes’. There is no concrete reason that what made this character a killer just for the appearance of their eyes. In some psychological disorders, people get irritated or develop envy based on their appearance through an inferiority complex. Mostly it happens under ‘narcissism’. Orna Afek mentions this as Grandiosity in his article *Reflections on Kohut’s Theory of Self Psychology and Pathological Narcissism—Limitations and Concerns* “Grandiosity is at the core of narcissism, and hence its presence as a dominant personality trait,” (166). The core reason behind this delusion is nothing but to take the life of the old man. Freud says in *The Psychology of Everyday Life*, “The memory disturbance in pathologic cases (in paranoia it plays the role of constituting factor in the formation of delusions)” (155).

The growth of delusion receives fuel from Oldman’s ‘vulture eyes’ and is waiting to taste the satisfaction of killing. Till the end of this short story, there is no chance to find any change in the murderer’s character. It is a concrete example that his psyche is unsound and it is under the control of the so-called ‘Id’. A Tiger will be in peace after filling its stomach with the blood of a deer. Like this, this unnamed narrator is commanded by his uncontrolled intuition like animals’ instinct. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud explains, “The forces which we assume to exist behind the tensions caused by the needs of the id are called instincts” (5). There is no serious role play of ‘vulture eyes’ in this short story apart from triggering his desire to kill an innocent man. These absurd eyes generate a hallucination and delusion inside his unconscious mind like the ‘wind mills’ from Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. As a reply to Sancho Panza, Quixote says, “They are giants, and if thou art afraid, get thee away home and dispose thy self to prayer while I go to engage with them in fierce and unequal combat.” (Cervantes 46). As per the law, a mentally disordered person cannot be



accused or convicted as a criminal for any criminal activity that he or she committed. But this murderer is not completely a mentally disordered person, instead, he struggles to satisfy his 'Id' permanently. Unfortunately, his longing for peace of mind is never been attained even after killing that innocent old man. His struggle against his psyche continues through the sound of Deadman's heartbeat. The disturbing 'vulture eyes' take incarnation as the sound of a 'heartbeat'. In this condition, this unnamed character's problem is not from the outside but from the inside. His unsound mind is not ready to get satisfaction even after the cold-blooded murder. Instead of repentance through guilty, his unsound mind switches the position from 'vulture eyes' to 'heartbeat'. His never-ending search for peace is like the curse of Sisyphus.

This blind fight against the unsound mind is described by the statement of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann from *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* "The terror-stricken person feels himself to be alone among deadly menaces, more or less blindly fighting for his survival against dreadful odds." (114). Poe concludes this story with the confession of the murderer not with repentance. Beyond those eyes and heartbeat, the unknown urging voice of his unsound mind takes a settled position after this confession. But there is no assurance that this hidden voice disappeared from his heart. He says, "Yes! Yes, I killed him. Pull up the boards and you shall see! I killed him. But why does his heart not stop beating?! Why does it not stop!?" (Poe 67).

Conclusion

Mother Nature has been creating and destroying its creations and attributions since the birth of this universe. In this process, some of them are set in the form and many of them are left as deformed. This explains the existence of imperfections around the universe. It is called anomalies in creation. It happens in the human species also as the mutation of cancer cells, and sudden failure of organs and motor function. From a different perspective, Poe's unnamed murderer can be classified as a social anomaly. Till the end, his unsound mind is left as incurable. Technically Poe has broken the actual dark side of jealousy, vengeance and sadism. All normal men and women might have a layer of unsound mind, but Poe developed that layer as a complete character such as a devil in human form. His intelligence and wisdom were turned off and his actions were controlled by the voice of his unsound mind. Before the school of psychoanalysis, Poe had been ahead of their time in their work. This short story has portrayed the extremity of an unsound mind through an unnamed character because his psyche is the speaker in this short story.

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