



EDGAR ALLAN POE’S “THE TELL-TALE HEART”: A TALE OF TERROR

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Abstract

Gothic writing or Gothicism in literature is closely associated to Romanticism: both are the product of an intense reaction against everyday reality and conventional religious justifications of way of life. But there is a slight difference between the two: while Romantic writing is the result of faith in a definitive order, Gothic writing is a gloomy examination of the precincts of man. Two hundred and fifty years ago, a British writer cum historian Horace Walpole was credited with inventing the first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Edgar Allan Poe revitalized the genre in mid-nineteenth century America. Soon the Tales of Horror carried a distinctly American flamboyance and astounding psychological depths. This inflection captivated readers then and even today also. “The Tell-Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s evergreen tales of terror. In this story, Poe brings out the ambiguous investigation of a man’s paranoia. The story gains its strength by the manner in which it portrays how the unnamed narrator tracks his victim (old man) as though he were a monster of prey.

Keywords: Gothicism, Dark Romanticism, horror, suspense, mystery, and insanity.

A style of writing in which gloomy settings, grotesque action, supernatural elements, romance and exoticism is used by the writer they come under the umbrella of Gothic fiction or Gothic literature. Gothicism actually emerged as the sub-genre of Romanticism in the eighteenth century England; in the nineteenth century it became famous as the darkest form of romanticism in the United States of America as ‘Dark Romanticism’. According to few scholars, Dark Romanticism originated as a subgenre of Transcendentalism Movement in America. The term ‘Gothic’ originated from the ancient Germanic tribe called ‘Goths’. The language Goths used to communicate was ‘Goth’. But as per the present study, scholars believe that the term ‘Gothic’ emerged from the medieval architecture of the ‘Goths’. Gothic architecture that still survives in the current day world is truly complex. It carries a dark, obscure, and gloomy appearance. Irrespective of its complex structure, this medieval unusual architecture became the inspiration for many writers; thus, giving a scope for the birth new literary genre – Gothic Literature.

The gothic writers took the help of elements like horror, suspense, mystery, and romance and weaved their stories. There arises a question why they used the said elements? Few scholars opined that they experimented with the new form but few came up with the suitable opinions that the gothic writers noticed the serious issues that are prevailing in the society which require serious attention like social injustice, class discrimination, gender discrimination, and corruption etc. Hence, in order to handle such serious issues, the gothic writers put their efforts to drag the attention of the people of the society. It is worth to remember Horace Walpole, an English writer cum historian who is credited with introducing the term 'Gothic' first in literature as a subtitle of his work. In 1764, he successfully brought out his groundbreaking work titled, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*. His book gave birth to a tradition of literature of terror which include abandoned castles, monsters, and damsels in distress. It may be better to say that his work sprinkled the essence of Gothicism for many years. Today Horace Walpole is considered as the chief originator of Gothicism in literature. Not only he is known as the first Gothic writer but also the founder of Gothic fiction.

The influence of Horace Walpole can be observed in the works of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. As the gothic writer of the Romantic Age, Ann Radcliffe adeptly combined the mechanism of fright with sentiment and used the effectual depiction of scenery in her works. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is a best known and widely read book of her today. Another Romantic gothic writer was Mary Shelley, the wife of famous Romantic poet of the time named P. B. Shelley. Her novel *Frankenstein* is a landmark in the history of Gothic fiction. Remarkably, she brought a new turn in the genre of Gothicism with her *Frankenstein* as it is also famous today as the first modern science fiction novel. In the novel she created a supernatural world where an evil man attempts to prove himself as powerful as God or equivalent to God.

When gothic literature was blooming in English literature, American literature was in the middle of a literary movement called 'Transcendentalism'. The focus of Transcendentalism was on science, Nature and human individuality. In response to this movement then originated Romanticism movement in American literature which laid stress on human emotions and feelings and neglected the harsh realities of science. Slowly from American Romanticism then took birth a subgenre called Dark Romanticism. As it was darker in tone, irrational, and demonic, American readers showed the disinterest towards this new genre. In order to attract their readers, American gothic writers started presenting their works with different salient features. For instance they started relying on the imagery, personification and symbolism; they framed their works by focusing on the psychological side of human life.

Among the American gothic writers, Edgar Allan Poe's place is worth remembering. In the nineteenth century American literature, he skillfully took the gothic genre to its extreme level. Some anonymous scholar also remarked that Gothic fiction became a toy in the hands of Edgar Allan Poe. It is also believed that the personal life of Edgar Allan Poe was filled with numerous tragic movements. Somehow this tragic side of his life helped him to glorify the worst evils of the world in his writings. He mainly put stress on the imbalanced emotional states of human mind which brings forth the evilness in the man. Psychological disorders in a man play a key role in his works which when heightened to a level leaves his readers spell bound. He tried his hand in the two important genres of the literature like short stories and poetry. Almost all of his works successfully explore the gothic themes. Today many scholars consider him as the master of gothic horror. Hence, he is credited as the Father of American Gothic literature. According to David H. Hirsch,

"... nineteenth-century Enlightenment America was hardly the kind of society one would expect to give rise to gothic extravagance and effete aestheticism. It is also tempting to think of Poe as a writer distinctly of his time, sharing with fellow great mid-nineteenth-century writers, like Hawthorne and Melville, leanings toward dark romanticism and the power of blackness."¹

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is a short story by American writer Edgar Allan Poe first published in James Russell Lowell’s literary and critical magazine named *The Pioneer* in 1843. Today it is considered a classic of the Gothic fiction genre and is one of Poe’s best known short stories. It is told in a first person narrative by an unnamed and unreliable narrator, a man who cannot be trusted to tell the objective truth of what is occurring. ‘Unreliable Narrator’ is a phrase coined by Wayne C. Booth in 1961 in his book entitled *Rhetoric of Fiction*. The opening paragraph of the story introduces the reader its narrator whose mental condition is not stable. He is a fine example of a person suffering with ‘Paranoia’. Paranoia is a thought process that causes an irrational suspicion or mistrust of others. People with paranoia may feel like they’re being mistreated or that someone is out to get them. They may also feel the threat of physical harm even if they aren’t in danger. As it is already mentioned earlier, gothic literature has a complicated narrative structure. The unnamed narrator and the story fit well in this tradition. Just like in his other works, Poe never makes it clear why the narrator feels obliged to retell the story and defends himself. With whom the narrator is conversing is also not clear – who is this silent listener, a reader can’t find. Some scholars listed out the possible chances regarding the silent listener that he may be a jail warden, or may be a doctor or psychiatrist, or may be a judge of a court, or may be a reporter who is interviewing the narrator. Few scholars also doubted the existence of the silent listener in the story as he or she really exists or not.

The story starts with the unnamed narrator who is admitting to an unknown listener that he is very ill. But at the same time he is in great shock why the unknown listener believes that the narrator’s mental condition is not good. Why he (unknown listener) calls him mad: “*It’s True! Yes, I have been ill, very ill. But why do you say that I have lost control of my mind, why do you say that I am mad?*” (64)*. He confidently claims his sanity and tells that his illness is somehow proved a boon to him. He feels that his senses had become stronger than earlier; especially his hearing sense. In general, illness creates a sort of dullness in a human being but in the case of the narrator it proved false. In addition to it he also claims that he is now able to hear the sounds floating from heaven and hell. This claim of his creates an atmosphere of terror to the reader. As a mortal being we are not supposed to be blessed with such type of boon which the narrator claims he is blessed with. In order to prove that he carries a sound mental state, he starts unveiling the story of his crime (murder) which he has committed but in a dignified way. There is an old man in the story of the narrator but what relationship he shares with the narrator is unclear. Even narrator too never mentions his relationship with the old man. The narrator says that he is even not sure how the idea originated in his mind to kill that old man as the old man never wronged with him and he too never expected old man’s money. Indeed, the narrator wants to say that he was not greedy for the property of the old man. The only thing that disturbed the narrator was an eye of the old man. The narrator compares the eye of the old man with an eye of a Vulture, a bird of prey. To him the old man’s eye was an evil eye that motivated him to commit the terrible crime. Whenever the old man looked at him with that evil eye, he felt himself cold enough to a dead man. Hence, he at last decided to close that eye forever. In order to close that eye forever, he killed the old man. The narrator then starts explaining the plan he made to kill the old man:

“Every night about twelve o’clock I slowly opened his door. And when the door was opened wide enough I put my hand in, and then my head. In my hand I held a light covered over with a cloth so that no light showed. And I stood there quietly. Then, carefully, I lifted the cloth, just a little, so that a single, thin, small light fell across that eye. For seven nights I did this, seven long nights, every night at midnight. Always the eye was closed, so it was impossible for me to do the work. For it was not the old man I felt I had to kill; it was the eye, his Evil Eye.” (65)

After the seven failed attempts of killing the old man, on the eighth time he gets succeed. On the eighth night he entered the dark room of the old man, fell upon him and held the bedcovers tightly over his head. For some minutes the heart of the old man beaten and at last became silent forever. With the idea of hiding the dead body so that no one can find it, he cut the old man’s dead body into pieces and then removed the three wooden planks of the floor and buried the slaughtered pieces of old man’s body. As he

surveyed his work, the door bell rang at 4 am. Three policemen were there to investigate some shrieks as per the complaint raised by one of the neighbours. With a light heart he welcomed the policemen and allowed them to search the house. He was so polite in his approach that the policemen easily get convinced at his woven story that the old man went to town to meet one of his friends. The policemen sat around chatting idly. Then suddenly a noise began within the narrator's ears. He grew agitated and spoke with a heightened voice in order to overcome the disturbance caused to him due to that noise but everything in vain. In disparity to the confusion going on in the narrator's mind, the police continued to chat amiably. He wonders how the policemen are not able to hear the loud beating as it was growing louder and louder. He then doubts that the policemen intentionally playing the game with him in order to mock him down. At last the narrator loses his patience and admits the crime what he had done with the old man in front of the policemen, "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?" (67)

No doubt, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" communicates a symbolic way of showing how a man drives himself farther into insanity through his own guilt or err. Moreover, he uses dark diction to accentuate the self-destructiveness of guilt and how it can ebb and flow the self-reliance of a man. The primary message that Edgar Allan Poe tries to communicate through his story of terror is that the human heart knows the truth and will always have a louder voice than the lies that are told but difficult to understand. Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" left a never ending mark on the minds of many readers including Harold Bloom, an American literary critic as he remarks,

"Murderer and victim alike are equally ghastly in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado." I remember, as a child, being badly upset by both stories, and frightened out of sleep..."²

References

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