



Analysis of Unreliable Narration in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*

Wang Ni

Foreign Languages Department, Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, Hohhot, China.

*Correspondence: hengshan.1990@163.com

Abstract: *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a typical Gothic mystery novel by Edgar Allan Poe. The novel tells the process of a crazy young man killing an older man and the psychological changes during the process from a first-person perspective. Much research on the narrative aesthetics, narrative style, and the gothic style; however, few studies focus on reliable narrative. By interpreting the theme and narrative angle of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, this paper will analyze the unreliable narration in the novel and explore the influence of unreliable narration on the novel's plot development so that readers can better understand the novel and Poe.

Keywords: the scaffolding instruction English writing teaching interest

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was a 19th century American poet, novelist, and literary critic. His novel is recognized as the pinnacle of short gothic fiction, a unique existence in any era. Edgar Allan Poe is the originator of detective fiction, the pioneer of science fiction, the master of horror fiction, and the pioneer of symbolism. Poe was also an aesthete. In recognition of his contributions, the Mystery Writers Of America established the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1946, the most prestigious mystery fiction award in the United States. The winning entries are decided by a committee of designated Detective Writers Association of America members. *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a typical Gothic mystery novel by Edgar Allan Poe.

The novel tells the process of a crazy young man killing an older man and the psychological changes during the process from a first-person perspective [1]. The author shows the young man's morbid condition from the narrator's point of view, which makes the readers deeply attracted and feel creepy after reading. Wang takes the Telltale Heart as an example to analyze the unreliable narration in the novel, which contains the deviation of intention between the apparent narrator and the implied narrator. Starting from Phelan's dynamic process of unreliable narrative, he studies the concrete performance of unreliable narrative in novels

and draws valuable conclusions[2]. Chen pointed out that domestic research on *The Tell-Tale Heart* primarily focuses on effect aesthetics and Gothic style to explore the suspense atmosphere of Edgar Allan Poe's novel[3]. A few people use Halliday's systematic functional linguistics to analyze the style and schools of the novel. Much research was done at home and abroad, mainly around the narrative aesthetics, narrative style, and gothic style. Still, never less reliable narrative ways of research. By interpreting the theme and narrative angle of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, this paper will analyze the unreliable narration in the novel and explore the influence of unreliable narration on the novel's plot development so that readers can better understand the novel and Poe.

Allan Poe and *The Tell-Tale Heart*

Edgar Allan Poe was a great mystery novelist in the 19th century. His short stories *The Tell-Tale Heart* and the Black Cat were viral, and he can be said to be the originator of suspense novels and a representative of the gothic novel writers. Many young mystery writers are honored each year because of their outstanding achievements in short fiction and now the Edgar Allan Poe Prize. He was the first American writer to try to rely entirely on writing but lived in poverty. He grew up with foster parents and later married his 13-year-old cousin. His literary achievements were so high that he devoted his whole life to writing but paid little attention to him while he was alive. Only after his death

[Received 10 Jan 2022; Accepted 28 Mar 2022; Published (online) 31 Mar 2022]

Publisher's Note: RCLSS stays neutral regard to jurisdictional claims published maps



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

did people begin to pay attention to his works. Poe's work is very personal. Edgar Allan Poe's works mix Gothic elements and break the boundaries of the original novel in various spaces to achieve the exchange between the author and the reader. His short stories are often written from the narrator's perspective, modern Mystery Writers Prize themselves on winning the Edgar Allan Poe Prize, but those heights are hard to come by.

The Tell-Tale Heart is Poe's great masterpiece. He used bold description and angles, giving the reader a different reading experience. His unique blend of gothic techniques, romanticism, and symbolism has been an unsurpassed presence in the history of literature. The novel is told in the first person, and the narrator is the murderer. From the beginning, the narrator proves himself calm and intelligent; but as the story progresses, the reader is surprised to find that the narrator makes a great deal of preparation to kill the old man. The narrator kills the old man and hides the body, then slowly panics when three police officers arrive, eventually exposing himself to his own panic. This narrative style has a lot of reading fun for the reader. Different people have different ways of reading. This narrative connects the reader and the author, but since the first-person narrative may be unreliable, it also gives the reader more possibilities.

In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator can hear the noise at the beginning, especially in the later period, he can listen to the older man's heartbeat. In a way, this is also a confession from the narrator, who has been tortured by the truth, tortured by murder, and gives himself a sensitive excuse. At the end of the story, he is still exposed as insecure and suspicious. The older man's blue eyes are more symbolic, symbolizing the narrator's fears, and may also indicate the narrator's difficulties in communicating in daily life.

Unreliable Narratives

Work is an artificially constructed text that only has its value if the reader reads it. Different people will interpret the work differently. The work is the author through the text to communicate with readers. There are two narrative angles in work itself: first person and third person. Booth believes that the criterion to judge whether a narrator is reliable or not depends on whether the narration follows the implied author's norms, that is, the representative of the correct world outlook, outlook on life, and values[4]. In other words, if the narrator's narrative is consistent with the implied author's point of view, he is reliable; Otherwise, it is not reliable. Chinese scholar Tang Weisheng believes that the first point of narrative communication proposed by Phelan is to place the narrative in the communication environment dominated by the implied author. The second point is to identify the narrative in the communication environment dominated by the reader[5].

The Tell-Tale Heart uses unreliable narration to form a "tension" in the discourse level of the text and promote the development of the narrative process. In the six principles of rhetorical reading, Phelan puts forward the "rhetorical triangle" concept, which includes speaker, text, and reader. He argues that "authors design texts to influence in some way. The reader, The author's design is realized through words, techniques, structures, forms and inter-textual relations. The reader's reaction is the result of the author's design through textual phenomena and refers to these designs"[6]. The first-person narration is usually what we call the internal perspective, which is subjective and full of personal feelings, similar to the Chinese poetry: "I don't know the true face of mount Lu because I am in the mountain". Unreliable narration is straightforward to occur. The third perspective is external, which is usually objective and reliable.

Unreliable Narratives in *The Tell-Tale Heart*

The Tell-Tale Heart mainly describes a morbid young man who wants to kill an older man because of his blue eyes. The whole novel revolves around his description of pretending to be calm, his preparation before the murder, his calm after the murder, and his calm to panic when the police interrogated him. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator portrays himself as: "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". This sentence is a typical feature of an unreliable narrative.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator does not directly say that he is mentally ill and paranoid but says that he is nervous and sensitive, which is contrary to the intention of the invisible author, so it can be said to be an unreliable narrator. And then, the narrator describes: "he heard all things in the heaven and the earth. He heard

many things in hell" . The narrator uses unreliable narratives to illustrate he was highly nervous, paving the way for the subsequent development of things in advance, but also caused readers to predict that he might cause some big things because of his mental disorder.

The narrator proves their conscious exaggerated narrative runs counter to the intentions of its expression, which means sane people in your ear couldn't hear the noise. The more the narrator describes, also the more he wants to escape his guilt; this also means that from the beginning, this work is to use unreliable narration. In Phelan's view, unreliable storytelling is a deliberate deviation from the norm[7]. The author looks at the whole thing from the point of view of the morbid narrator, which makes the reader realize that the murderer's reason for the murder is normal, which is quite different from the implied author's intention.

Then the narrator says that he wanted to kill the older man simply because his eyes were choking him. However, the older man did not hurt him or even have too much interaction with him. However, the narrator still described his crime motive in a clear language, which was very objective and wise, and proved that he was not a madman. This is very different from the implied author's intention, the more expressed, the more the narrator feels seriously insane. The narrator, *The Hours*, reminds the reader of his cleverness and watertight murder plot to prove that he is not a madman, that it is all because of someone else. But in fact, the reader has already judged him to be an excessively sick person from these descriptions. From these descriptions, the reader can also judge that the older man's blue eyes may not be a motive for murder, and perhaps more so are the pathologies of the narrator.

The narrator tells the story of their next seven consecutive days this to do. He fixed "midnight" into the old man's house, every day very "carefully" wake up the old man, but also hopes that the old man's eyes open every day, so that it could kill the old man, but seven days before the old man did not wake up, but to sleep in the morning. The narrator will go to the older man's house early the following day to make a scene and cover up what happened last night. The full description of the narrator is very logical and calm, but it can see from his diction that he is highly abnormal. The precision of time arrangement and meticulous work cannot be regarded as the conclusion that he is just mentally sensitive, but undoubtedly more proves that he is a psychopath and pathological person. The reader thoroughly explores all the preparation the narrator makes before the killing. His so-called wit is an excuse, and his coolness is quite different from the intention implied in the actual narration. The author's seven days of careful planning only shows that he puts his values above the law, not universal values, and thus fully embodies an unreliable narrative. This approach also allows the reader to get into the novel and get some thinking.

After the eighth day of the killing, the narrator skillfully dismembers the older man and hides his body under the floor. He can also appear calm and answer questions when the police come to his door. This shows his morbid and terrible side. He prides himself on the place where he hides the bodies after killing them; he has no remorse for killing them and even invites the police to sit in the place where he hides the bodies. The watertight answer is a testament to the narrator's pure psychopathy, which is at odds with the underlying theme of what John Wilkes Booth calls an unreliable narrative. But when questioned by the police, the narrator suddenly can hear again, even the older man's heartbeat; he gradually becomes confused. From the beginning of the novel can listen to the voices that others can not, but at the end, can still hear. He thought the three policemen must have heard it and only pretended to be calm,

so he became more and more flustered, unable to hide his fluster, and finally gave himself away.

Phelan points out that misinterpretation is about the narrator's misunderstanding and interpretation of events, characters, and situations, in which case the narrator "I" is an unreliable interpreter. The author arranges the narrator to hear the sound suddenly, and from another side, the reader feels that the narrator begins to feel guilty, begins to feel guilty, and even starts to blame himself. This is a deviation of the reader from the narrator. When the readers realize the unreliable narration of the first-person writer, they start to deviate from the angle of the narrator and bring in their thinking.

They recalled that the narrator's narrative does not create an atmosphere of terror and frightening words throughout the novel but instead is told in very colloquial terms. The reader is presented to the narrator as a sick, deranged, very cold, and terrible murderer, for whom killing is a job, a task, not a terrible thing.

In the process of reading, the reader from the first close to the final alienation, but also see the ethical values of the reader. At the beginning, the narrator begins to narrate in the first person. It is effortless to shorten the distance between the reader and the narrator, and the reader and the narrator have a natural connection. But as the novel unfolds, the madness and pathos of the narrator make the reader begin to wonder whether the narrator is right? Began to wonder if the narrator was right? When the reader reads his insane plan to kill the older man, he knows that this is an unreliable narrator and that the narrator himself has been misleading the reader. The reader is even more surprised and even prejudiced when the murderer begins to kill because the implied intention of the work is to criticize the murderer's behavior or convey it in ethical terms. The eyes and the heart in the novel have a unique symbolic meaning, symbolizing the ethics and morality that bind the narrator. He wants to break away from this bondage, so seeing the older man's eyes is very uncomfortable. In the end, it becomes an excuse to kill people or to rebel against this kind of bondage and oppression. But in the future, after he kills people, the human factor still prevails, so he keeps hearing voices and feeling the older man's heart beating so that others can listen to it. That's how he ended up exposed.

Conclusion

The Tell-Tale Heart is a great mystery novel the author, through the unreliable first-person narrative for the reader, presents different works. The narration of the results usually presents us with virtual facts, but we find these false descriptions in the narration of the works draw readers away from the narrators. The narrator's description of his motive

for killing contradicts the reader's reading. To sum up, the author of this novel describes the murderer carefully prepared for various activities to kill the older man finally, but at the surface to create a transparent image. The author uses the first-person narrative perspective to self-evaluate the impropriety of the preparatory activities in the process of killing. And the author uses the wrong evaluation to enable the reader to see the distance between the narrator, the implied author, and the reader to prove his sane. Finally, the value of unreliable narration is reflected. Through unreliable narration, *The Tell-Tale Heart* presents readers with a new perspective on analyzing literary works. Through this tension, on the one hand, Poe implies the communication between the author and the readers. On the other hand, it also means the author's ethical teaching, hoping that it will be helpful for future readers to read both *The Tell-Tale Heart* and Poe's works.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: We acknowledge the support of our various colleagues of Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences for their grateful comments and insights in improving the paper.

REFERENCES

[1]. Allan, Poe. (2008). *The Short Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

[2]. Wang, Xinhao. (2021). Analysis of Unreliable Narration and the Narrator's Reliable Identity in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Hebei Normal University of Science & Technology (Social Sciences)*, 20(2), 16-22.

[3]. Chen, Huijun. (2020). On the unreliable narration in the narrative communication of the *The Tell Tale Heart*, *Journal of Luohe Vocational Technology College*, 19(5), 87-89.

[4]. Shen, Dan. (2009). *Narrative, text and subtext—rereading and classical short stories*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

[5]. James, Fearon. (2008). Take Poe's *A Cask of Amontillado* as an example, *Narrative* 12(5), 78-80.

[6]. Jiao, Guilan. (2015). The Moral Implication behind Psychology Metamorphosis: An Interpretation of Readers' Participations in *The Tell Tale Heart*, *Journal of Heze University*, 37(3), 48-51.

[7]. Liu, Jie. (2020). The Unreliable Narration and Ethical Teaching — The Rereading of Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Journal of Hubei University of Education*, 37(7), 8-11.