

Stylistic Analysis of the Short Story “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe

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Abstract

Stylistic analysis as a methodology, is important to understand text as well as their contents that how language works within a text. The present paper aims to analyze the story from stylistic point of view discussing the literary and rhetorical devices used in detail. The methodology used for the paper is stylistic analysis. The paper concludes that Poe in his short story has extensively used literary and rhetorical devices to prove insanity, obsession, guilt, tension and other recurring themes of story.

Keywords: Stylistics, Analysis of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Edgar Allan Poe, Literary Devices, Rhetorical Devices.

Introduction

Stylistic analysis as a methodology, is important to understand text as well as their contents that how language works within a text. Stylistics therefore makes language explicit and interprets how information has been arranged within a text using various stylistic and rhetorical devices. Stylistic analysis also helps to look at a piece of text from own perspective and the analyzer can develop an argument based on literary and rhetorical terms ignoring the author’s intentions (Carter, 2010). Stylistic analysis in linguistics refers to the identification of patterns of usage in speech and writing and in literary studies is usually made for the purpose of commenting on quality and meaning in a text. The purpose of stylistic analysis is either to examine language through its elements or to understand and interpret it. It needs a detailed and keen attention so far as the text is concerned from looking at it as a whole to ranging up to observing the parts and their function in relation to context. (Stylistics, 2017).

Stylistic analysis of a text can be carried out in several ways. A simple analysis can be done by commenting on grammatical constructions or the vocabulary chosen by the author. On the other hand complex analysis can be made by judging the quality of imagination the author has provided or the creativity brought in the writing. Stylistic analysis can also support observations about writing discussing the particular type of genres in details (ibid.).

Methodology

The research adopted in this study is qualitative and the methodology is stylistic analysis.

Research Question

The paper aims at finding out what and how are the literary and rhetorical devices used in the story.

The Literary and Rhetorical Devices in the Story

Symbolism: Poe is famous for his use of symbolism. In most of his poems and short stories he has used symbolism to have an idea of his own views about various things such as life, love, religion death etc. His work, through use of symbolism, clearly mirrors his opinions. (Phillips, 2008) In the story he has used various things which carry symbolic significance.

The Old man's Eye: The eye is a symbol of narrator's paranoia and insanity as there was no obvious reason to kill the old man. The narrator only wanted to get rid of the eye. "One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture." The eye also indicates less visual clarity and simplicity of the old man, "...a pale blue eye, with a film over it" that he generally did not trust people. Eyes are the windows to the soul and the narrator describes it as the eye of a vulture. Vultures, which feed upon the dead, are always present and diligent and see everything, symbolizing penetration. He is frightened that the old man will see deep into his fears. (Turner, 2013)

The eye, as the conscience of the narrator, knows well about his evil plans and pricks him from time to time, but he does not follow his conscience's path and decides to destroy it. He connects old man's eye with an image of death when he calls it vulture's eye. "Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold" The eye further has been described in separation from the old man because he is a kind man himself and this separation has been done by the narrator in his extreme insanity because when it is separated, it becomes an object which should be murdered. The eye is not the reason of narrator's insanity. He is already mad, not aware of the fact that insanity makes him to interpret the abnormal-looking eye in a wrong way. In his confusion, he needs to get rid of old man's sight. The narrator is not wise either as he claims to be because he is unable to see virtues in the old man. What he sees is only eye as a murderous hallucination and he is driven mad when lantern's light falls on that eye. In the end, his inability to see clearly results in his own betrayal. In his obsessive blindness, he calls policemen villains and proves that he is as evil as the old man's eye (Literary devices in "The Tell - Tale Heart, 2017).

The Watch: Watch is visual and auditory representation of time, used several times symbolized as the approaching death. The narrator has full control over the time of old man's death and that is why he compares himself to a watch's minute hand. Watch represents the journey towards death whether it be a watch itself, a

death watch in the wall, the period of seven days, or the many times the narrator describes how "very, very slowly" he moved (ibid.).

The Lantern: The Lantern has been mentioned as a counter to darkness as well as a source to light to see the evil in its full force. The narrator finally kills the old man once the light is fully shed upon his evil eye because he has seen the full force of the eye. If the eye is a representation of narrator's evil or insanity, he must destroy that eye which is a reflection of him. The lantern also represents the truth that the old man was never evil (ibid.).

The Bed and the Bedroom: A bedroom is a place to feel safe where no threat is present but for Poe a bedroom is a place of murder and the bed is a weapon (ibid.).

Midnight: Midnight is the darkest hour and enforces the evil tone of the story. As dark is associated with evil, the story is about doing evil things at evil hour. As it is still dark at 4' O clock in the morning as midnight, that indicates that midnight is not only reflecting the evil actions but evil inside the narrator himself (ibid.).

Bell: The bell represents the end of the old man and end of the narrator's sanity also. It also represents the end of the narrator's quest. Poe also wrote a poem about bells and the theme of that poem was life, being young, growing old and finally dying (ibid.).

The Heartbeat: It symbolizes the narrator's guilt or fear which ultimately torments him to the point that he admits the murder. He thinks it is the heartbeat of the old man he is hearing but actually his own heart, beating after the old man is suffocated, dismembered and then shoved under floorboards. As a symbol of narrator's insanity, the beating heart might only exist in his imagination not in real. The use of short sentences by Poe also creates a rhythm like a heartbeat (ibid.).

Amplification: The amplification, repeating of a word or phrase adding more detail to it so that it might not go unnoticed otherwise, is found in the story:

"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; but the noise steadily increased."

Through using "but the noise steadily increased," the narrator is trying to convince about his sanity. He is however he is not able to convince anybody as the story goes on. He merely delves deeper into insanity (Anastasiia, 2005).

Apophysis: Apophysis, which asserts or emphasizes something apparently by ignoring or denying, it occurs throughout the short story because the narrator is trying to deny his madness (ibid.).

"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."

Epithet: Another rhetorical device which is found in the story is epithet which is an adjective or adjective phrase and names an important characteristic of a character. Thus the adjective phrase "dreadfully nervous" is naming the important characteristic of the narrator (ibid.).

Parenthesis: Parenthesis, the use of words into text, is to elaborate something. It is found in the story as, "I undid the lantern-oh, so cautiously – cautiously (for the hinges creaked) –I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye." Poe has used parenthesis to explain the narrator's reason for using lantern so cautiously (ibid.).

"His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily."

Thus Poe is explaining the reason of being so dark in the room and also some additional information about the victim (ibid.).

Rhetorical questions: Rhetorical questions are not answered by the writer, but they their answers are clear. Usually the answer to a rhetorical question is only yes or no. These questions are used to give emphasis or provoke or simply to drive conclusion from the facts available (ibid.).

"Would a madman have been so wise as this?"

"Why would you say that I am mad?"

"For what had I to fear?"

Answers to these questions are very clear that the narrator who claims to be sane is actually mad (ibid.).

Hyperbole: The use of hyperbole, an exaggeration, helps to understand the mind process of a person who is completely mad. He says, "I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell", "It took me an hour to place my whole head...", "For a whole hour I did not move a muscle..." (ibid.).

Metaphor: Metaphor is a comparison of two unlike things saying one thing is something else not using like or as. The eye of the old man resembled a vulture's eye. This comparison shows that narrator's scary feeling about the eye. As the

vulture is associated with evil in most of the literature, the narrator thought that it was the Evil eye. Later the movement of the narrator compared with "A watch's minute hand" shows how cautiously he was opening the bedroom door (ibid.).

Anaphora: Anaphora is such word or phrase which is repeated to impart emphasis, unity and balance, at the beginning of a clause (ibid.). In "The Tell-Tale Heart," anaphora has been used many times:

"I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell."

"With what caution—with what foresight, with what dissimulation, I went to work!"

"He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself,"

"It is nothing but the wind in the chimney; it is only a mouse crossing the floor."

"It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp."

"It grew louder – louder – louder."

"Yes he was stone, stone dead,"

"How stealthily, stealthily...." "Slowly – very very slowly," "steadily, steadily"

"They heard! – they suspected! – they KNEW! – they were making a mockery of my horror!"

The anaphoric use of words helps to intensify the situation and makes the atmosphere more intense and frightful. The reader waits for the next lines and events and very deeply understands the narrator's state of mind and his nervousness. Poe uses repetitions at the beginning of the story to show tension while insanity at the end of it. In this way both style and content mirror each other through use of anaphora first in the beginning and then at the end. Within the story, the use of repetitions creates a frenzied tone that makes it clear that the narrator is not stable mentally. He even does not tell what he did to hide his crime. His repetition of "no" tells that he erased the old man completely. "There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever" (ibid.).

Personification: Personification is when an animal, object or idea is given human characteristics by the author. In this short story, Death is personified as a person, "All in vain; because Death is approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped his victim." This personification has helped to develop the mood. It further tells that the narrator is extremely afraid of dying and considers Death's victim powerless in its hand. The unknown disease he is suffering from may be the fear of death. Moreover, the "Evil eye" is also a personification of the eye because eye cannot be evil (ibid.).

Simile: Simile is a comparison between two unlike things. It uses words "like" "as". The ray and thread comparison has been made using "like":

"So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until at length a single dim ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye."

The comparison of heartbeat to a drumbeat has been done using "as" in "It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage." The comparison of darkness with pitch is done with regards to the bedroom of the old man as in, "His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness. . . ." (ibid.).

Flashback: Flashback means to take the readers back into past by interrupting ongoing scene to give background information. From this point of view the whole story is a flashback as the narrator is confessing his crime. "... observe how healthily .. how calmly, I can tell you the whole story" (ibid.).

Foreshadowing: Foreshadowing is the hints and clues that are provided by the write that suggest future events in a story. It is used to create suspense in the story:

"But ere long, I feel myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ear...." "and so by degrees, very gradually, I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever."

Foreshadowing clues in the story hint that the narrator killed the old man out of paranoia:

"I have told you that I am nervous: so I am."
"I smiled - for what had I to fear?"
"It was a low, dull, quick sound - much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton."

Paradox: Paradox is an absurd and contradictory statement that can be true. "I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him" (ibid.).

Alliteration: Alliteration is repetition of same sounds and words with less distance between:

"Hearken! and observe how healthily, how calmly, I can tell you the whole story."
"Meanwhile, the hellish tattoo of the heart increased."
"It is the beating of his hideous heart!" (ibid.).

Irony: Irony means when opposite of what is expected happens. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" Poe has used many types of irony successfully to depict the events

of the story. After killing the old man, the narrator hides his heart beneath the floorboards along with rest of the body parts. When the police arrive, the guilt of killing causes his own undoing, and here irony is when he admits killing of the old man (Ramirez, 2005).

Verbal irony means that a character knowingly exaggerates something but in fact he means something else. The verbal irony depicts that he was "never kinder to the old man than during the whole week" before killing him. He calls himself calm, logical and sane but in fact he is really insane and agitated who confesses his crime as a reaction to ticking sound of the old man's heart beat as he claims. Thus through his words he claims he is not insane but through his actions it is clear that he is insane. At the end of the story another example of verbal irony is present when agitated by the ticking sound he shrieks, "Villains"... "Dissemble no more!" (ibid.).

The situational irony in "The Tell – Tale Heart" tells that madmen are not reasonable but in the story justice seemingly bothers him a lot. He successfully completes the murders and hides that body in such a perfect manner that policemen do not suspect him. The situation is fully under his control but he merely confesses because he "hears" the old man's heartbeat. The line "I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire" also depict situational irony because he only wanted to kill the old man due to his own madness and nothing else (ibid.).

Dramatic irony means when something happens in the story that is more meaningful to the reader than the characters because the reader knows something and characters do not know. It is ironical that the police do not know about the murder while the reader knows (ibid.). The dramatic irony is at its peak as in the story it reads:

"I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, ...placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim."

Yet it is that the policemen remain unaware and have no suspect on the criminal. Also in the beginning, the reader becomes aware of the fact that the narrator is insane but the narrator himself claims that he is not mad. "But why will you say that I am mad? The disease has sharpened my senses" (ibid.).

Conclusion

Poe in his short story has extensively used literary and rhetorical devices to prove insanity, obsession, guilt, tension and many other themes and motives that develop the story. All these devices given not only meaning to the text but also make the quality of the text very powerful in very Poe fashion. Looking at the text in great detail and observing its various parts in fact, makes functions performed by various devices clear in the context of the passages of this short story.

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