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Poe Teaching Readers to Solve It Themselves

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Despite his bizarre marriage to his younger cousin and being found raving in the streets before his mysterious death, Edgar Allan Poe has become one of the most loved, yet most traumatizing, American writers of all time. His short stories and poems are often read during the time leading up to Halloween in school classrooms. The contemplation of death, the focus on the grotesque and macabre, and outright murder are all exceptionally popular topics in Poe's writing without being gory. While these topics are characteristic of Poe, his writing is not excruciatingly detailed, so parents tend to be much more comfortable with their children reading his stories. After all, most parents do not really want their children to be reading graphic descriptions of a murder, but they do want their children to be able to encounter the real world in a mature manner. At the same time, children are often excited by reading stories that are meant to scare them or are on the verge of being forbidden by their parents. For readers of all ages, Poe's way of walking the line between the familiar and the forbidden draws his readers in and allows him to experiment with different techniques.

One such technique that Poe has spent a considerable amount of time developing is his use of an unreliable narrator. Many of Poe's mystery stories use an unreliable narrator who is either a genius, mad as a hatter, or a combination of the two. This technique commonly causes Poe's readers to question whether the narrator is telling the whole truth, representing the truth inaccurately, or both. Sometimes, the narrator maintains reliability for the most part and occasionally slips into an unreliable state. Other times, the narrator does not provide any

trustworthy information to the readers. Whatever the form, Poe's innovative use of several different types of unreliable narrators challenges his audience in unique ways that force readers to solve the story and find out what is real and what is not rather than passively taking in the story.

In order to do so, readers need to pay attention so that they can spot an unreliable narrator. Some things that readers ought to look out for in texts are summed up by John O'Connor's article "Teaching Unreliable Narrators." John O'Connor writes a few questions readers can ask themselves as they are reading to figure out whether they are dealing with an unreliable narrator. He writes, "1. Is the narrator too self-interested to be reliable? 2. Is the narrator sufficiently experienced to be reliable? 3. Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable? 4. Is the narrator sufficiently moral to be reliable? 5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable? 6. Are the narrator's words too inconsistent with his actions to be reliable?" (49). These are all questions that attentive readers ask themselves subconsciously as they read stories. The questions enable the readers to see further beyond what is stated in the story. Once they understand what the narrator is doing and why the narrator is unreliable, readers can look into Poe's stories and find ways to understand what Poe is trying to get the readers to figure out on their own.

Edgar Allan Poe's desire for a narrator who causes readers to think for themselves while reading begins to show its presence not through an insane narrator; rather, it is through the words of a friend of a detective that the unreliable narrator takes shape. Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) is told from the point of view of an unnamed person close to the detective C. Auguste Dupin. He speaks authoritatively, but Poe uses the story to draw the reader in and adds details that cause the reader to try to figure out the mystery of the story. The narrator is not the

detective, though; he is a close associate of the detective who frequently admits to Dupin that he does not understand everything. At one point, the narrator tells Dupin that “this is beyond my comprehension. I do not hesitate to say that I am amazed, and can scarcely credit my sense” (10). Readers come across this phrase and are able to realize that the narrator may not be telling the whole story. The narrator might leave out a few details. These details cause readers to think. They must ask themselves, “Is the narrator sufficiently knowledgeable to be reliable?” (O’Connor 49). With the narrator stating that he does not understand how Dupin reaches his conclusions, readers can safely assume that the narrator may be leaving out details unknowingly. While the narrator is not lying, he is incapable of presenting the facts to the full extent. Certainly, the narrator is no fool. He is quite intelligent, and his intelligence only emphasizes the detective Dupin’s greater intelligence. In a special way, the narrator is unreliable simply because Poe needs him to be in order that the readers would become more active participants. Paul Jahshan wrote about how the narrator influenced the readers. He wrote that “This indirect observation which bases itself not on a purely attentive examination of the present but which tries to re-trace an absence specifically as a trace becomes, to the detective-made-reader, the source of peculiarity” (85). In the end, the readers learn to be a detective similar to Dupin via the narrator’s lack of understanding all of Dupin’s techniques. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle later uses the same style of narrator, Dr. Watson, in order to make the Sherlock Holmes’s cases more enthralling. Both Poe and Doyle take a highly intelligent man and set him in the shadow of a far more intelligent man who makes the narrator appear dumb. This setup causes readers to question what the narrator says. They are forced to be active in the story.

Later, Poe would go on to write the story “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) with a narrator who claims he is not insane. In addition to O’Connor being useful in understanding “The

Murders in the Rue Morgue,” his techniques can also be applied to this narrator. The first few lines start with the narrator questioning his assumed audience. The narrator asks the audience, “Why will you say that I am mad? ... observe how healthily--how calmly I can tell you the whole story” (“The Tell-Tale Heart” 3). From that point on, the reader must choose whether or not to believe the narrator. Is the narrator truly sane? Poe leaves it to the reader to answer the question. Throughout the story, the narrator describes his efforts to keep the audience believing him saying, “You should have seen how wisely I proceeded--with what caution--with what foresight--with what dissimulation I went to work” (“The Tell-Tale Heart” 3). The narrator wants the audience to believe him, to think of him as a genius. Instead of taking the narrator at his word, readers should refer to John O’Connor’s questions and think. The most relevant questions from O’Connor’s article are “1. Is the narrator too self-interested to be reliable?... 5. Is the narrator too emotional to be reliable?” (49). Once the readers spend a little bit of time thinking over these questions, readers get the notion that the narrator is trying to make himself look sane and is no longer capable of telling the story truthfully.

Furthermore, the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” discusses the aftermath of the murder. One critic writes in her article,

He insists he was clean and precise and when the police knock on the door at a late hour, the narrator is confident that there is no evidence of his crime. He invites the officers in to search the house and then offers to sit and converse with them in the very room where he killed and buried the old man. (Bouchard)

Even though the narrator is confident that he will not be caught, there are some aspects of the story that require the reader to question whether the narrator has truly stumped the officers.

Normally, the narrator might try to point the officers somewhere else, but he does not. Poe leads

the readers to believe that the narrator is overly confident that his crime will go unnoticed, and he tells the listener about it when he explains how he covered up the murder. The only problem is that the likelihood of the narrator not being caught is very slim.

One reason the narrator's plan could never work is the fact that bodies smell shortly after they are dead, and the narrator stowed the body under the floorboards. It does not take a genius to figure out that there will be an undeniable scent of decay in the room, and the officers will notice. In addition to the issue with the body, the narrator began to act a little strange a few minutes after the officers' arrival. The narrator says,

I now grew very pale;--but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice... I talked more quickly--more vehemently... I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations... I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the... I foamed--I raved--I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards. ("The Tell-Tale Heart" 8)

There is not an omniscient narrator to explain things to the readers, but even a child would know that the narrator's actions are not the actions of an innocent man. How could the officers be unaware? It would be impossible for them to ignore the behavior of the narrator. His confession of the crime is only confirmation of what they already had begun to figure out. Also, the narrator in this scene begins to act very spastically, like a cornered animal. His actions do not paint a picture of a sane man in complete control of his crime. The dashes in the narrator's dialogue hints that he is not in control of his words, much less so his actions. O'Connor's article would ask readers to consider the competence and emotions of the narrator. His knowledge in getting away with murder is severely lacking, and he is not mentally stable enough to be able to explain

the facts. The narrator is no genius mistaken for a madman; he is a madman incapable of telling his own narrative truly. For the narrator to be a genius, he would need to be in better control of his situation and be able to get away with his crime, like Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado.”

Montresor provides a sharp contrast to the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Poe introduces his readers to Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado.” Montresor is calculating and appears levelheaded throughout his act of vengeance. Montresor begins his story in a much calmer tone and seems to fill his story with logic. The first part of his narrative reads, “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul...” (“The Cask of Amontillado” 12). Montresor, in this section is setting himself up to be examined by his audience. He is telling the readers that they are the ones in control of the situation. Montresor’s vocabulary implies that he is the one in the right. At the same time, readers are led to think that maybe Montresor is not so calm and collected. When he mentions that the readers know the nature of his soul, his sanity and levelheadedness is called into question. It is only the second sentence of the story, so the readers do not know the nature of his soul. Montresor asks his readers to think about what they already know about him, but they know nothing about him except for his desire for revenge. He believes that they will agree with him, but readers must be cautious. John Dern wrote concerning this passage saying, “Montresor establishes a link between himself and his auditor, whose sympathy he must evoke to vilify Fortunato with efficacy” (61). Montresor is giving the audience the chance to evaluate the story for themselves. Is Montresor justified in his killing of Fortunato? Poe forces his active readers to decide for themselves whether or not he is.

Another part of Montresor's story that is interesting for readers is his behavior toward Fortunato. Montresor never forces Fortunato into his grave; rather, he is led there willingly like a clueless child. At one point, he tells Fortunato, "Come... we will go back; your health is precious" ("The Cask of Amontillado" 16). To Fortunato, it would seem that Montresor cares for him, but the following phrase would hint to the readers, and Fortunato, that his kindness is really a façade. Montresor states "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as I once was" ("The Cask of Amontillado" 16). Montresor in this instance is hinting to Fortunato that Fortunato has done a great disservice to Montresor; however, it is hidden within a compliment and well wishes so that Montresor may carry out his revenge. Toward the end of the story, Montresor attempts to validate his actions toward Fortunato. When Montresor is placing the stones to seal in Fortunato, Fortunato calls out to Montresor, "For the love of God, Montresor!" In response, Montresor says simply, "Yes... for the love of God" ("The Cask of Amontillado" 19). This small exchange places a sense of irony into the story. Montresor is not exactly doing this act of vengeance for God, at least not according to what he tells the readers. Readers are forced to think when they come across this passage. One question they could ask is, "Is the narrator too self-interested to be reliable?" (O'Connor 49). Instead, Montresor is insisting upon a false sense of justification for his crime while continuing without a sense of guilt. Elena Baraban writes, "When the narrator concludes that his heart is growing sick 'on account of the dampness of the catacombs,' it becomes clear that Montresor feels satisfaction about his monstrous deed even after fifty years" (165). Montresor feels no guilt; he feels perfectly justified. He feels that he did the right thing. Instead of Montresor being the one acting villainous, Montresor compares it to Fortunato being villainous. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" displays no attempt to

justify his actions in such a manner. Instead, he simply clings to the idea of the “evil eye” being a good enough cause.

Montresor also displays an incredible talent in planning that is deeply lacking in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Whereas the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” leaps upon his victim upon seeing the eye, Montresor bides his time slowly and prepares his wine cellar to be the perfect location for a crime. Several instances show the careful planning of Montresor. The most important instance occurs very early in the story. Montresor tells his listener that “There were no attendants at home... I had... given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance” (“The Cask of Amontillado” 15). In order for Montresor’s plan to work, his house needs to be empty so that no one could see or hear what was going on. By contrast, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” a neighbor hears a scream and calls the police. Readers will probably need to stop and think about whether the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is truly a genius if he is caught by a neighbor. In contrast, Montresor’s planning appears to have paid off at the end because he states, “For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them” (“The Cask of Amontillado” 19). If Montresor was telling the truth, he managed to be successful in managing to keep his murder a secret for fifty years. No one suspected Montresor, or they were unable to come across any evidence that would condemn him. In any case, the true genius would have to be Montresor. “The Tell-Tale Heart” had a narrator that was found out almost immediately after he committed the crime (within twenty-four hours). In addition to that, Montresor and the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” show how narrators will not always tell every detail. Narrators can be unreliable by misrepresenting information. Montresor purposely leaves out what Fortunato has done. One question readers may

have is: What did Fortunato do? It is very likely that Montresor is leaving out the description of what happened in order to keep appearances and make himself look more righteous.

The two narrators show how Poe would use their words to reveal inner realities. Readers could look at what Montresor says versus what the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” says and see that they are very different narrators. Part of this decision was to set up readers to see Poe’s own views. Jennifer Bouchard writes, “Edgar Allan Poe was a key contributor to the Dark Romantic movement in literature in the mid-19th century... Poe and his more pessimistic contemporaries believed that man was more prone to sin and self-destruction as is evidenced by the narrator in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” (Bouchard). The narrators in both “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado” reveal the dark nature of the men personally while “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” follows the footsteps of evil men who are not the narrator. Readers have to take the clues hidden within the text in order to figure out what the villain is planning, despite the vast amount of skewed information they are given. They must stop and look closely at what signals Poe has left for them. Readers need to ask questions, questions similar to what John O’Connor advises readers to ask. Readers can use his questions to identify the unreliable narrator, and then they can try to figure out what Poe wants his readers to see.

Edgar Allan Poe forces his readers to evaluate the story for themselves by using narrators with different levels of reliability. His narrators are unable to tell the whole truth to their readers for many different reasons. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” narrator is not intentionally deceptive; rather, Poe needed Dupin, the main character, to be obviously more intelligent. The narrator from “The Tell-Tale Heart” attempts to deceive his audience about his sanity, but he was not very good at it. In contrast, Montresor of “The Cask of Amontillado,” who is also insane, has the brains and motivation to deceive his readers. Readers can use these narrators’ quirks to

evaluate the stories to figure out what is true. Poe's innovative use of the unreliable narrator was highly unusual when he began, and it caused many readers to move away from passive reading. Before Poe, the unreliable narrator was fairly rare. By the end of the twentieth century, the tool could be found everywhere. While Poe is known for his powerful use of the unreliable narrator, his talent for influencing future writers is what has held the most power over time. Poe's influence still lingers today, watching writers and pushing them toward new and innovative ways to excite and challenge their readers.

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