

Talkin' Tell-Tale: Themes & Thoughts of "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allen Poe

[Start of Transcript:]

JON (00:04)

"The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allen Poe was first published in 1843 and depicts the ramblings of a person as they recount their murder of an elderly man with a vulture eye.

HANNAH

In this inaugural episode, we will discuss our initial encounter with "The Tell-Tale Heart" and thoughts coming back to it now, as well as the strange narration style and theme of the story. This is AnaLITical.

[THEME MUSIC PLAYS]

(00:41)

Hello!

JON

Hello hello!

HANNAH

I'm Hannah.

JON

And I'm Jon, and we're your new favorite literary nerds.

HANNAH

So Jon, tell me what you thought about this story.

JON

The first thing I noticed, while reading "The Tell-Tale Heart" was the length of the story, it is very short. Even for a short story, it is remarkably short.

HANNAH

The first thing I really noticed when I was reading it, was that it wasn't as spooky as I thought it was. (laughs) When I first read it, I was in seventh grade, it was for an English class, and when I reread it, I was like, this just wasn't as scary.

JON

You've never really dealt with scares very well though.

HANNAH

(laughs)

I definitely have not been a very good, like, horror movie watcher, or scary movie goer at all. But at 12 years old, this was way creepier than it was this time.

JON

You might be right. When I think back on *The Tell-Tale Heart* I always imagined something longer and something definitely more creepy. This is - this kind of just hits you right, and like it punches you in the mouth, like boom here it is, whereas when I was younger I remember a build up, I remember more of a buildup.

HANNAH

See, I do too. I feel like whenever I thought back on it you always heard like the *boom-boom boom-boom* in the background and maybe that was just the version we saw like they added that because it was first published in 1843 so there have been, you know retellings and reworkings of it, so possibly we did see a different version where they did build it in more.

JON

Yeah that's for sure. I think literature is kind of-

HANNAH

Malleable, almost.

JON

Yes, it's very interpretable, is the word I was looking for.

HANNAH (in background)

Oh, okay.

JON

And you can interpret it how you want to and you can definitely tell that especially, this isn't exactly a poem, is a short story but it's very beautiful writing, it's very scriptful. And that goes for a lot of Poe's work, he was a poet first and foremost, I think. So this might be a short story, but it is, it's a poem in everything but rhyme.

HANNAH

I mean, but you can just have prose poems so it could be, like you can interpret it as a poem for sure, I can see that. One thing I want to point out, is that we immediately start with a speaker who is almost addressing the reader. So when we talked about that like strange narration style, it's just instantly, you're like, who are we talking to or who is talking to us, and who is you? Because it says you and when we jumped down to like the end of the story you do see quotations when he's addressing the police so it's like do we actually know who the speaker is and what the context of the story is, is it just him talking to like a creature or something he sees as a manifestation of his guilt or is it him talking to us as the reader?

JON

I think the not knowing definitely lends something to the creepiness of the story, like just the-

HANNAH

Fear of the unknown kind of?

JON

Yes, the fear of the unknown. It's just definitely scary, humans like to know things.

HANNAH

No, for sure, I definitely think that fear of the unknown is a theme they even play on in the story with the old man being, you know, kind of woken up by the killer coming in and he sits up for an hour, it says, or for hours just being awake and just that fear's almost palpable to that killer.

JON

Poe does play on that in the story.

HANNAH

Mmhmm. So jumping a little bit different of a point now, why did he want to kill the man like that's an interesting thing you see. It does talk about his Vulture Eye, and that the eye kind of scared him, which we're going to do a little bit of a medical spin on this, because I remember talking about this in 7th grade, that it would have been a cataract eye, so it would have been like glossed over, which would have been really common in Poe's time. Elderly people just suffered from cataracts, they still do but now we can fix them. The killer is frightened by this eye but then my question is kind of like why, why was he frightened of this eye? Because it would have been probably pretty common in this time it was written and published.

JON

Yeah, he just had a cloudy lens, right?

HANNAH (talking over Jon)

Yeah.

JON

That's all a cataract is.

HANNAH

Yes.

JON

Yeah, I think a central point to the whole story is the unhinged-ness of the narrator that we see. He starts off with ramblings, he starts off by shutting the word "true" like I mean, it's not a very sane man, he doesn't come across as, even though he does try to convince us this. He claims that I was never crazy, I never did anything that I didn't know I was doing. I don't think planning

someone's murder and stalking them and coming to their bedroom for a week at night is the acts of a sane man but the way he says it is just like, 'yeah this is just my normal Tuesday, this is what I do.'

HANNAH

And with that, yeah he did try to point out like, 'I am a sane person, I do know what's going on' and he even like it was premeditated, so you know if this was a transcript to the police well now they're docking up his charges 'cause it was premeditated. (laughs) Getting a little bit of *Law and Order* on us. (laughs)

JON

I don't think he's trying to convince us so much as himself that he wasn't crazy. Like, he's trying to explain to himself I think more than us why he killed a man.

HANNAH

I like that thought. Although, then it sounds like he's trying to justify the murders to himself, which of course he probably is like if he is that guilty. So no, it sounds like he's trying to justify the murder to himself, which if he is feeling so guilty which we kind of get at the end of the story where he is hearing the heart which, is *The Tell-Tale of the heart*, ooh title alert. So we see the manifestation of his guilt with him just constantly hearing the heart get louder and he's like the police are going to hear it they need to get out and he tries to get the police out so they won't hear it but he's only one who hears it, so that's the manifestation of his guilt. So I do think we are kind of seeing this story out of order. Where the beginning is him kind of rambling and he's recounting the story and not just seeing the story as it goes.

JON

I would definitely agree with that and I would like to state that he invited and was the reason they were there for longer than they had to be. He is what led to his own downfall. He was his own worst enemy in a sense, like he was like 'yeah, come in' and then he led them on a tour of the house basically, and then he put his chair right over where he buried the man, and then he was just like, 'oh I can do it I'm definitely not crazy' and then his craziness once again, got him.

HANNAH

I would also like to point out that we never actually do see if the speaker is a man. I kind of see it almost as like Poe writing from a point of view of himself so I would like, call it a he. We did say "they" in the beginning just as a gender neutral pronoun, because we really don't know what gender or sex the killer is.

JON

We don't ever get told what gender the narrator is, but I think it's very safe to assume it is a man because this is Poe we are talking about, and I think that's very important to take into consideration is the author. So Poe wasn't necessarily a feminist by any means, he didn't write very much feminist works, he isn't renowned for his feminist works, he's just not. For psychological writing you look inwards, so I think it's very safe to assume the narrator in the

story is a man, but it could be a woman and I think that the gender isn't the focal point of the story.

HANNAH

It's definitely not but I think it would be interesting if you saw it as like it was the elderly man's, because we do know that the victim was a man, so if it was his wife who killed him so she was like, 'I went in there and looked at him' but again I don't think it is. There are some other short stories where they do depict women as the killers and you can usually tell immediately that it was a woman, either by other female characters in the story or the police would have indicated that it was. So as much as I don't like to say it, the usual norm is a man especially for Poe as Jon said.

JON

I think the gender isn't the focal point here, because Poe wanted to write from a point of view of anyone. I think the story, if we're digging really deep, which we are, can be said about anyone, anyone can suddenly become unhinged one day, anyone can be crazy I think, anyone can deal with mental illness is a better grasp of that, but anyone can be crazy is good enough. Anyone could just lose their crap at any moment and kill their elderly person they're caring for, maybe not you know nowadays but it could happen.

HANNAH

Which it's interesting that you point out that you, that he was caring for the elderly man. I don't think it ever specifically says that so it's an interesting interpretation I think. That is a question I was kind of thinking of while we were talking about this is why was the elderly man living in his home or was he living in his home, was it his neighbor again we don't really get a clear understanding of that but I think it is another assumption we can make that he is living in the home with him.

JON

Well especially when a story like this is so short you do it to make assumptions and I think the safe assumption is the one that jumped out the most to you

HANNAH

And of course we can always dig deeper, which is kind of what we do here and we can find out some deeper meanings to take from this for today's time as well. So with that nice segue, we're going to talk a little bit about mental illness becoming a physical illness which I think is one of the central themes. So whenever we can talk about the theme of The Tell-Tale Heart you can obviously see that manifestation of guilt is one but you can read that into it a little deeper as mental illness becoming a physical illness as we see with him you know kind of just jumping out of his skin to tell the police was going on and he's physically hearing the heart beating but obviously it is not. Because the police really don't indicate that they hear anything they're still jovial and sitting calmly but he is kind of scrounging to get them out as fast as he can.

JON

Yeah, without a doubt. And I'm going to take a step back from that point of you actually and say that he doesn't necessarily think anything's wrong with him but you can obviously tell something is so the point you made earlier that this transcript if it was given to a police officer would put him in worse trouble, I think it would get him out of trouble. Because anyone reading this could say, wow he is insane and that, you know, criminal defense is a defense.

HANNAH

I like the insanity plea here.

JON

Another plain to see theme point that I see in the story is the ticking of time and you see that with the onomatopoeia of the clock ticking which is the heart obviously and you kind of see it as old man and the narrator is described as younger in some sense because he's talking about this man as old and it might even say that he might be younger. You can kind of interpret the story to be about the same guy.

HANNAH

Okay, I'm going to jump in here, I can kind of see what you're saying about it being about the same person so possibly yes this younger man did kill someone and now he's an old man and maybe when this old man was sitting up he seeing himself like again as a young man coming in That's an interesting kind of view point to have on it and something I definitely didn't think about the first time.

JON

Yeah, and the tick ticking just really makes you think of time and the heart is- the comparison of a heart to a timepiece is pretty prevalent you know that is your is your timepiece personally as a human.

HANNAH

And it does in the beginning it kind of talks about he hears different sounds and so not only the sounds of the heart he says he hear sounds from Heaven, he hear sounds from Hell. He definitely his hearing is something he kind of focus is on to show that he is not mad by his words and so I do think that the time of the clock chiming, it goes into, back to his hearing.

JON

The sounds he's hearing could definitely add to the theme of it being the same guy because as you get old, you lose your hearing so maybe this is just an old guy recounting on his life and he really is feeling guilty for it. So maybe this story is less physical than we are making it out to be and it's more just the internal psychoanalysis of this man.

HANNAH

For sure, and then, just to go to the end of it, the only thing we ever see him physically say I'm just going to quote it real quick as 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. Edgar Allen Poe, 1843, cite your sources! But the why does it not stop the why does his heart not stop beating he could just be talking about his own and like that's what he's hearing over and over again as he kind of goes through these moments in his old age he just keeps hearing his own heartbeat and even if we say it's not old age while he's sitting there talking to the police he could be hearing his own heartbeat as a young man as well it just would be so loud if he's nervous you know it's thundering in his ears if you've ever been nervous before you kind of feel like you're overwhelmed when you hear your heart beat really loud I read.

JON

I agree with that. I think also, I've really fallen in love with this idea of it being the same man so I'm going to go back to that real fast, as you get older your hearing slips, like we said in the beginning and also your mind! So maybe he wasn't quite as crazy as he is coming off across as he is now, as when he was younger. Maybe in his old age he's misremembering some things, and he just feels terrible for killing someone. And maybe the policemen could be seen as a judge figure or maybe even God himself and he's so worried about this murder coming in the clear and he feels so guilty for it and he's so worried about his life and you interpreted the heart meaning he was ready for death, but I could interpret it as everlasting life which is most often compared to an afterlife so the policeman are God in this comparison and he's so afraid of them finding out but, and I think this is a very religious outlook, but he is just so ready to reveal what happened and that's what he finally does in the end, he says "look upon it."

HANNAH

No that's an interesting point with the "look up on it" too. I would just like to point out real quick that there are some other quotation of like spoken word, there's some, at the "who's there" "die die" so the last sentence is not the only one that is spoken but does seem to be the most prevalent to me when there's only three sentences of dialogue and they're not separated out from the rest of the text that last sentence just seems to be a little bit more highlighted with it being at the very end and it being the last thing you read for the story.

JON

I agree but another viewpoint on that is that since it's a retelling of a story that happened in the past the narrator isn't really looking to tell the exact story what happened it's not a dialogue story-driven it's just this happened then and this happened and then I remember this phrase because it was so important to me.

HANNAH

That's true and another thing to note is that with it being a first-person narration we kind of have an unreliable narrator all narrators are inherently unreliable unless they give you some fact to back up their reliability so we can interpret this really anyway we want to and we can say he's lying we don't have to believe what he's saying at face value. Well Jon is there anything else you'd like to talk about with the story.

JON

There's certainly more analysis than can be done on any story I'm not going to say the story is picked to the bone, but I've made all my points and I think you might have too, so listeners definitely reach out to us if you had a contrasting or maybe just to agree with us I don't know reach out to us let us know what you thought of the story.

HANNAH

We can be found at Instagram at analitical with an i pod at Twitter at analitical with an i pod so it's a n a l i t i c a l pod all one word Facebook at analitical pod and we'd love to hear what you have to say thank you for listening!

JON

Hope you guys enjoyed.

[Credits: with some funky music playing]

JON

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HANNAH

It is edited by Jon Newland.

JON

The artwork was created by Hannah Newland using Logomakr and is owned by Hannah and Jon Newland.

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