

The Tell-Tale Sound: Acoustic Narrative in *The Tell-tale Heart*

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Abstract: *The Tell-Tale Heart* is one of the masterpieces of Edgar Allan Poe, a pioneer of the American short story in the 19th century. The work is compact and fast-paced, and has attracted the attention of academics at home and abroad. Numerous scholars' studies have focused on the aesthetics of effect, the atmosphere of horror, and unreliable narration, while acoustic narratives also play an inescapable role in Poe's novels. Taking Edgar Allan Poe's "*The Tell-Tale Heart*" as a textual object, this paper combines the concept of acoustics with narrative theory to analyse its narrative features and illustrate ethical lessons.

Keywords: *The Tell-Tale Heart*; Acoustic Narrative; Moral Implications.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is a 19th-century American poet, novelist, poet, essayist, and literary critic who occupies an important place in the history of world literature. His creative short stories and his critical theories are well known in the academic world. Poe developed the famous "effect theory" of composition, in which he argued that, whether composing poetry or fiction, the writer must be concerned with a unified effect, must always think of a predetermined ending, and must make every plot essential[1]. Poe's novels mostly depict horror, murder, madness and nightmare, etc., which deeply portray the irrational mental state and psychological characteristics of people in the non-realistic state.

Poe wrote many types of short stories, including detective stories, Gothic horror stories and science fictions, which utilize a great deal of skillful narrative methods. *The Tell-Tale Heart* is told from a first-person narrative point of view, creating a state where the character speaks and the reader listens. Poe describes a neurotic, psychopathic young man who develops a morbid hatred for his neighbor's old man because of his "vulture-eye[2]". As proof of his sanity, the young man describes the process of cutting up the old man into pieces and hiding the body below the floor. When the police came for questioning, he seemed to hear the sound of the old man's heartbeat, getting louder and louder. Finally he went into hysteria, a complete breakdown of the spirit, and finally confessed to murdering the old man.

As one of the most famous short stories, *The Tell-tale Heart* attracted much attention of critics, scholars and researchers upon its publication in the year of 1843. The more representative ones from abroad such as Gita Rajan, an associate professor of English at Fairfield University, focuses especially on its narrator, and argues that the narrator is indeed female who kills the old man out of humiliation at being harassed by his fatherly surveillance[3]. However, such argument is far from persuasive and hard to convince many critics of Poe studies. On the contrary, Robert Con Davis conducts a masculinist reading of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, analyzing the tale using Lacanian principles. He argues that the act of gazing, whether the old man's or the narrator's, is a metaphoric power transaction between the subject and the

object of the gaze[4]. Besides, Paige Matthey Bynum and Brett Zimmerman, an assistant professor at York University, both explore the moral insanity in this story[5]. In 2013, Noor Abu Madi and Shadi Nei mneh analyzed this short story based on Systemic Grammar and applies many linguistic techniques[6]. In addition, *The Tell-Tale Heart* catches much attention of various researchers because of the mysterious symbol "vulture eye", like Marie Bonaparte[7], Daniel Hoffman and E. Arthur Robinson[8]. The relevant overseas studies have mainly focused on the theme, or the plot, or the surroundings, or the language and so on, with fewer studies on narrative strategies.

In China, *The Tell-tale Heart* has also become the focus of many scholars. At first, more scholars focused on Poe's "aesthetics of effect", such as Shen Dan. She argues that if some of Poe's tales express a moral, then that moral tends to be implicit and inseparable from the structural "unity of effect," and the tales may react or respond to the cultural context in a certain way[9]; besides, there are also Zhuang Yan [10] and Yang Yanan who studied the effect of horror in the story; at the same time, Chinese scholars have also analyzed the advancement of the text through the angle of different linguistic styles, for example, Chen Hongping & Li Xuwei[11] studied the systemic functional grammar, and in cognitive linguistics there are Gao Yuan & Yang Shouyi. Unreliable narratives in the novel have received more attention in recent years: Shen Dan studies the association between unreliable narratives and moral lessons[12], along with Liu Jie and Wang Xinhao[13]; there are also Zhang Muxiao, Chen Chen, and Fu Xinhui, who interpret *The Tell-Tale Heart* from a psychological perspective; and scholars interpret it within the framework of existentialism (Ren Dongmei) and stylistics (Kang Weijie and Sun Chao).

In general, Chinese and foreign scholars have studied the *Tell-Tale Heart* from a more comprehensive perspective, but there are still fewer studies on the acoustic narrative perspective that has emerged in recent years. The field of narratology has always paid great attention to visual culture, thus neglecting the importance of acoustic culture. In *The Tell-tale Heart*, the main events of the novel are all connected by the sense of hearing, and the author has constructed a larger "acoustic space" than "visual space" in the story world, in which the soundscape has its inherent logic and authenticity.

This paper aims to analyse the narrative characteristics and ethical interpretation of the novel by combining the concept of acoustics and narrative strategy, so as to promote and enrich the artistic value of the novel. It will contribute to have a deeper understanding of the unique connotations and functions of the story, grasping the author's revelation of human nature and concern for social conflicts.

2. Simulation and Imaginary: The Representation of Acoustic Narratives

2.1. "Auscultation" and "Soundscape": Research Tools for Auditory Narratives

The over-expansion of visual culture has severely squeezed other sensory modalities. Since the 1950s, some scholars have noticed the imbalance of this crushing phenomenon, and subsequently put forward the concept of "acoustic space"[14]. Canadian scholar R.M. Schafer laid the basic academic standard and solid theoretical foundation for the study of auditory culture. He put forward the concept of "soundscape"[15] for scholars to study acoustic culture to open a new door.

The leading figure in the study of acoustic narrative in China is Professor Fu Xiuyan, whose *On the Narrative Voice*[16], and *On Soundscape* have made important contributions to the development of acoustic narrative in China. His new work *Research on Acoustic Narration* (2021) is to correct the name of "listening". In the comparative field of Chinese and Western narrative traditions, he is more inclined to identify with the Chinese traditional "listening to the sound and feeling". He hopes to "re listen" to the classics with the help of "auscultation" and "soundscape", understand the artistic value and thinking significance of the works, and realize the auditory turn from "paying attention to listening" to "giving consideration to seeing and hearing"[17].

"Auscultation" and "soundscape" are important concepts to be applied in the study of acoustic narrative. In fact, the object of acoustic narrative research is the auditory-related narratives in the narrative works, and through "auscultation"[18] to the sound-related events in the narratives, we can construct the auditory space corresponding to the visual space and the "soundscape"[19] corresponding to the landscape. The visual space and landscapes constituted by literary narratives are narrated in words, and they require readers to use their imagination to penetrate the descriptions of the words and construct their images from the symbols of the words. Similarly, the sounds in fictional narratives are also expressed in textual symbols, not real biological or material sounds. Only by fully mobilizing the imagination, and listening with the heart, can we "auscultate" all kinds of sounds beating in the textual symbols, and only by using sound as a medium, and mobilizing the auditory sense, "can we realize auditory narratives"[20]. Only by using sound as a medium and mobilizing the auditory senses can we "realize the representation and transmission of auditory narratives and material objects from one shore to the other"[20].

2.2. Mimicking Sounds and Narrating Events: Presentation of Narrative Strategies

In order to achieve the effect of onomatopoeia, the first-person narration of *The Tell-Tale Heart* adopts a spoken narrative style. The text uses a lot of oral narratives, most

notably the use of short sentences and dashes, which strengthens the oral characteristics. Reading through the whole text, we can find that there are few complex long sentences in the whole narrative, while short sentences are everywhere. Take the first paragraph of the novel as an example:

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. [21]

As we can see, single words or phrases form the body of the paragraph, like "True!-nervous-very...not destroyed-not dulled them...destroyed-not dulled them..." These words are used to strengthen the tone and intensity of the oral expression. Besides, another prominent feature is the frequent use of dashes: in the first paragraph of just a few lines, the use of 5 dashes; the entire narrative text of more than 2,000 words, with 68 dashes. The density of dashes is not found in Poe's other novels, and the extensive use by other writers is also very rare. A large number of dashes can produce strong narrative strength and emotional intensity, to achieve the effect of highlighting the voice and acoustic narrative.

How sounds "narrate" events and how sound events are narrated is how acoustic narratives are expressed in the text. There are three words related to sound in the text: noise, sound and voice, which appear 17 times in the text. Such a high frequency of use is to present the "soundscape", i.e. the various sounds that act on the ear. In addition, more than a dozen onomatopoeic words are used, such as "crying", "creaked", "echo", "groan", "bell", "shriek", "chucked", "chirp", "death watches", "beat", "drum" and "silence"[2]. The onomatopoeia is a word that imitates natural sounds, and in literary narratives, they are used to denote sounds, which are concrete sources of sound. They can greatly enhance the vividness and imagery of the text, which is a unique acoustic depiction of the performance of literature. For example, "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." [2] The words "chimney" "mouse" and "cricket" all describe direct sources of sound. The aural depiction is undoubtedly closer to the senses, as the sounds are played on the ears, allowing the reader to "auscultate" the "chirp" and "creaked", thus creating a "soundscape": the fear in the old man's soul continues to grow. Above all, a textual acoustic spatial effect is brought to life in the reader's mind through the use of a variety of onomatopoeic words, as well as the emphasis on sound and detailed and vivid narration.

3. The Rhythm of the Heartbeat: An Audiovisual Interwoven Narrative

3.1. The Presentation of Synaesthesia In Animal Imagery

Synaesthesia is a rhetorical pattern that uses figurative language to transfer senses when describing objective things, communicating and interlacing different senses such as hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch, etc., and shifting and converting them to each other, and shifting the words that originally indicated sense A to indicate sense B, so as to make the imagery more vivid and graphic[27]. The text links the sound of the heartbeat with the sound of the clock and the

watch, reflecting the sense of rhythm, making people either nervous or afraid, as if they were there.

There are two types of animal imagery in the text. Firstly, according to the narrator, "I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire." [2] The reason given by the narrator for killing the old man is that "it was this! He had the eye of a vulture - a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; 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." [2] The text describes the old man's appearance only in terms of his eyes, and they are "vulture eyes". Vultures are birds who prefer to eat things that are already dead like road kill, and very frequently in literature and in film, when the birds like a vulture or a crow shows up in the story, it's usually a foreshadowing of disaster or death. These bird tells that something bad is about to happen.

Why does the narrator depict only eyes of the old man? Fu Xiuyan once pointed out in his article The narrative semantic of appearance description that the physical description of characters has the function of evocative mimicry, but the core emphasis of such descriptions is centered on the facial attributes of the characters, with a particular focus on the character's eyes [22]. In the West, the legend of the evil eye has been around for a long time, even dating back to Biblical times, 3000 years ago. It is believed that anyone with an evil eye has a supernatural power: just one look at the other person can ruin that person's life. Therefore, there is only one way to solve the problem, and that is to destroy the "evil eye" first, including the carrier of the "evil eye", the life itself. In the story, the "vulture eye" appeared four times before and after, and its repeated appearance, like a film picture fixed in the reader's mind, plays a catalyst role for the overall reading effect of the story. It enhances the suspense of the novel, making the reader's psychological nerves tense until the end.

Another animal imagery is the "death watch"(报死虫). Death watches often make noise by banging on the rafters of old buildings on quiet summer nights. As a result, they are often associated with silent sleepless nights and have been named the watchful worms of the dead or those who will die. In the story, the narrator said "He was still sitting up in the bed listening; - just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall." In such an eerie and frightening environment, the sound of death watches being reported also makes the reader's insides well up. In the story, the vulture-eye become the "catalyst" of the whole plot, and the trigger for the narrator to kill, but the sense of hearing assumes the function of linking the whole narrative and constructing the "soundscape". According to Fu Xiuyan, "Once the connection between sound and event is made, the soundscape can be defined as the integration of a series of sound events." [23]

3.2. The Tell-tale Space and Uncoverable Leaky Heart

The tell-tale image in the novel is not only the sound, but also the environment. The text does not heavily portray the location of the murders, but only a few words that "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." [2] In these short sentences, it is easy to see that the room in which the murder took place is with a certain degree of closure. In fact, however, this

seemingly closed room has the only entrance and exit, i.e. the door. The novel gives a detailed description of how the narrator enter the room, "every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh so gently! And then, I had made an opening sufficient for my head". It is clear that the door, or more specifically the doorway, is the place where the tell-tale imagery of the room. "I made an opening sufficient for my head, put in a dark lantern, and then I thrust in my head" [2] all very slowly and carefully, and the secret just slipped out through the room's only entrance and exit.

Just as "observation" and "auscultation" constitute a pair of audio-visual categories, the "field" in which the story takes place is also divided into "seeing" and "hearing", and their corresponding concepts are "landscape" and "soundscape" respectively. Sound imagery in the novel similarly exhibits leakiness. As the setting of the novel is set at midnight, in the darkness the narrator's sense of hearing becomes particularly acute: "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." This narration sets the stage for his ability to hear a variety of sounds that are difficult to hear, including the sound of watch, and the old man's heartbeat after he kills him. Then I will focus on analyzing the sound of the watch.

The word "watch" appears four times in the text. The first time it is mentioned is in "Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine". There is nothing special here, it is just a metaphor to show how careful the narrator was when he entered the old man's room. The second "watch" is the "death watches", which is different from the first "watch". It is no longer a watch, but a kind of worm with the meaning of death. It can be said that the author's choice of the expression "the death watches" in the novel is obviously closely related to the construction of the special connotation of the imagery of "watch". When "watch" appears for the third time, its imagery has become complete and vivid, "Now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart." The image of "watch" becomes "a watch enveloped in cotton". This image is repeated later, as the fourth occurrence of "watch", and the author italicizes the repetition to make the intensification more obvious, "It was a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton." The ticking sound of "watch" reminds us of the old man in the quilt on the bed and the sound of his heartbeat, thus setting the stage for the heartbeat later in the text. But whether it is the old man in the quilt, the watch in the cotton, or the sound of the heartbeat, all these sound images give away the secret in this unusually quiet environment. Through association and imagination, the writer uses the metaphor of a watch to evoke the reader's hearing to sense the heartbeat, thus creating an atmosphere of horror and tension that strongly resonates with "I".

4. The Evil-Ego and the Other: The Moral Implications in the Tell-tale heart

4.1. Evil-ego: Conscience and Survival in Acoustic Narratives

The most important tell-tale image in the novel is "heart", which has already been made clear in the title of the novel.

Although the image of the heart appears several times in the novel, the definite article “the” makes the meaning of the heart point to a specific person, and from the narrative plot, the “heart” undoubtedly refers to the old man’s heart. “I” dismembered the old man’s body and sealed it under the floorboards, while the sound, the old man’s heartbeat, leaked out the secret and made “I” finally confess to killing the old man.

However, there is a question here. Must the tell-tale heart be the heart of the dead old man? According to common sense, the old man is dead and his heartbeat has stopped, so where did the heartbeat sound that the narrator heard come from? In the novel, only “I” and the old man know the secret. If it is not the old man’s heartbeat, then it can only be the narrator. The source of the narrator’s hatred is the old man’s vulture-eye, while vulture’s eyes are characterized as keen and sharp. When the vulture soars in the sky, once it discovers its prey on the ground, it will quickly swoop down and launch an attack to capture the prey, and the chickens, rabbits and other prey that are attacked tend to tremble with fear. In the view of the narrator, the old man’s eyes can see through his heart, and the narrator feels that he has become “the other”[24], the “prey”, and he feels inexplicably afraid of the “power of the gaze”, which finally prompts him to make up his mind to murder the old man. The narrator mentions that “And this I did for seven long nights –every night just at midnight –but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye”[2]. Closed “vulture eye” can not send the power of the gaze, the narrator will not feel the pressure, fear, murder is therefore suspended. On the eighth night, when the weak light shines on the old man’s eyes, the narrator finds that the “vulture eye” is open, and finally makes the decision to murder the old man.

From this we can see that “I” still have love and conscience in heart. When the only reason for killing the old man disappeared, “my” repentance began to beat, and became stronger and stronger, and finally made “I” to tell the secret and confess the murder. Therefore, detaching from the superficial plot of the novel, we can learn that the deeper meaning of the heart refers to “my” repentant heart. As to how the deeper meaning of the heart became tell-tale, we have to mention the reason why “I” kill the old man - the “eye”. Early on, some scholars have suggested that “eye” and “I” have the same sound, and the author even speaks of the old man’s eyes as evil beings, that is, “Evil Eye”, which represents the “Evil I”[8]. Therefore, destroying the evil eye is also destroying the evil “I”. In other words, when “I” kills the old man, it is also killing the evil side of “I”. The evil of “I” is the shell of the heart of repentance, which is closed in the depths of the heart, even without the “I” itself noticing it. When the evil heart stops and disappears, and the heart of repentance beats, the “I” is forced to “reveal” and confess its sins, in order to redeem the heart of repentance that has been obscured by the evil. Through the analysis of the heart above, the deeper meaning hidden behind the surface meaning adds a thought-provoking implication to the horror of the whole novel. As Shen dan mentions, Poe’s novels actually contain some sort of moral implications in their narratives.[14]

4.2. Identity Marginalization and Alienation: Social Value Statutes and the Absence of Subjects

“No matter what the era, the ideal work is inevitably a

microcosm of real life.”[25] The French art theorist Hippolyte Adolphe Taine once said. In conjunction with the above analysis, what really makes the narrator give away the secret is his deep inner self. From this we need to further analyse the author Edgar Allan Poe’s personal and social context at the time.

Edgar Allan Poe lived in a non-ideal era, where capitalism led by the Industrial Revolution was characterized by materialistic desires, power struggles and class oppression, which caused great physical and psychological trauma to people. His life was ill-fated, and his life, feelings, and creations were often vilified by public opinion. The harsh social reality made him suffer from great psychological imbalance, so that he wrote all kinds of morbid environments and characters into his works, and made his own backward feelings and rebellious mentality work in a way that was contrary to the normal way of portrayal. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Poe takes a psychopathic schizophrenic patient as the narrator, not blindly for the purpose of creating a purely horrifying effect. To a certain extent, he was deeply aware of the abnormal psychological state of the American people at that time, and put his pen to paper in his work to enlighten and warn the readers.

Silverman sees Poe’s work as a reflection of his own life experiences[26]. The irrationality within Edgar Allan Poe stems on the one hand from his powerful sense of duty, his deep sense of guilt and grief over the untimely deaths of the women he loved - his birth mother, adoptive mother and wife. On the other hand, it comes from external stimuli. The indifference of his adoptive father, John Allen, to Edgar Allan Poe and his repeated refusals intensified Poe’s sense of loneliness and aversion to men, which in turn aroused in him the emotion of the “will to power” to control the outside world. At the same time, the indifference and alienation between American people were becoming more and more serious. Mourning for his beloved and the constant stimulation from the outside world make us better understand the intertwined feelings of longing for love but hatred in his heart, just as the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart* lightly confesses that he “loved the old man”, but later he hypocritically and cruelly kills him, behind this contradiction is the author’s deep sense of powerlessness, vulnerability and sadness. The contradictory conflict between the narrator’s hypocritical, absurdly pluralistic personality and the realities of life in turn reveals the absence of his subjective value and his subjection to an alienated reality. In this way, the unreliability of his discourse reveals a reliable marginal and alienated identity.

Like observation, auscultation is also a kind of active information-gathering behaviour, the listener’s ear receives information from the outside world[23]. During the eight nights when he was planning to kill the old man, he had to listen to the old man’s room for more than an hour in the middle of the night with bated breath, in order to listen to the old man’s movements[2]. The author’s narration overflows the acoustic space into the old man’s room, connecting the individual with the society, and constructing an acoustic space that transforms from hearing “alone” to “co-hearing”. The author gives full play to the acoustic effect, letting the old man’s neighbors hear the old man’s screams before his death, thus attracting three police officers to come to the house to inspect, and the “co-hearing” also exposes the narrator to ethical condemnation and legal judgement.

5. Conclusion

Acoustic narratives can be traced back to the origins of Eastern and Western culture. The cultures of the oral tradition era were conveyed through sound. Through the skilful use of sound, Edgar Allan Poe succeeds in creating a tense and exciting reading experience that allows the reader to empathize deeply with the narrator's inner world. The acoustic narrative is an indispensable factor for the realization of Poe's "Effect Theory." The novel places the story in an eerie, dark room, where the scene and ambiguity of sound is intensified, giving the characters and readers a strong sense of thrill and horror, which is essentially a psychological effect created by the sound. At the meantime, in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the two main characters have no names, the author intentionally blurs and hides their names to eliminate the distinction between the individual and the other, and uses the narrator "I" and the old man to refer to the universal characteristics of human nature, which enhances the effect of ethical criticism. By analyzing the the narrator's perception of ego-identity and moral allegory embedded in the acoustic narrative, we can dig deeper into the themes of Edgar Allan Poe's work and exploring the social enlightenment we could obtain.

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