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English 1302

"The Tell-Tale Heart": A Nineteenth Century Emotional Roller Coaster

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart," the author tells the story of two unnamed men, and how one, consumed by his hatred for the old man's eye, commits murder and ultimately, confesses. Through the entire story Poe gradually builds up suspense, steadily at first, then faster and faster, until, at last, the reader's heart is pounding in his or her own chest much the same as the titular heart. Poe, using carefully chosen words to set the tone and pace, keeps his audience in suspense until everything finally culminates with reader's own pounding heart and the narrator's shrieking confession.

The first interesting element of the story is the lack of information regarding the narrator. The author lets the reader know that the narrator is living with the old man, and that the old man is dear to him, but there is no information given on whether the old man is an elderly relative, close friend, or even a business relation. In fact, the author makes no mention of the narrator's gender. She may be old man's younger wife or even live-in servant. The only information given about the narrator is the he or she suffers from a disease. "The disease had sharpened my senses - not destroyed - not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute" (3). The deliberate ambiguity of the narrator's role in the old man's life creates a distinct amount of apprehension throughout the story.

The author also uses very precisely chosen words and punctuation to set the tone and pace of his story. Poe begins his story with a shout, "True!" (3). Using this one word coupled

with an exclamation point grabs the reader with an urgency often saved for a story's climax. After this initial shock, the author slows his pace, first describing his "acute" sense of hearing and reassuring the reader of the narrator's sanity (3). The next few paragraphs move evenly, with Poe using words like "gradually" and "caution" to set the pace of his story telling (3). In exquisite detail, he explains watching the old man, night after night, so that the reader feels as if he or she is moving just as slowly.

When the fateful night of the murder finally happens, the pace quickens. Poe begins using words like "suddenly" and "startled," and for the first time, someone speaks: ". . . the old man sprang up in bed, crying out--'Who's there?'" (4). The following paragraph begins again with an even pace, the narrator describing lying in wait, hearing the old man groan. When the author quickens and slows the pace, it creates a sense of unease in the reader. Poe does right up until the end, with the narrator screaming "Villains! . . . dissemble no more! I admit the deed!" (8).

Poe has long been considered a master of suspense, and "The Tell-Tale Heart" is clearly a shining example of why that is so. Through expert use of words and punctuation to set his pace, and the contrast of the ambiguity of the characters' identities with the attention to detail regarding the plot, Poe creates a dark and menacing tale that draws the readers in. It has often been said that we fear what we do not know. By holding back almost all details of the narrator, the reader is made apprehensive and distrusting. Coupled with the literary roller coaster of speeding up and slowing the pace of the story, Poe created a macabre work filled with suspense and terror.

Work Cited

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Tell-Tale Heart." *ibiblio*. 1843, E-book, Accessed 2 Dec. 2019,

https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Poe/Tell-Tale_Heart.pdf.