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English 1302

Fiction Essay

The Feeling of Suspense in “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Suspense can be used in many different ways within a story or a poem. It can have readers excited to know what is going to happen next, and it can also have them feeling nervous as to what may happen. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Edgar Allen Poe tells the story of a sane man that became completely insane by plotting and murdering an innocent old man all because of his eye. Poe leaves his readers in suspense throughout the whole story by his different use of aural imagery, sentence structure and punctuation, and changes in events. He lets the readers become one with the narrator feeling just as nervous and anxious as he does throughout the story.

The first method that Poe uses to keep his readers in suspense is the use of aural imagery. He allows the reader to somewhat imagine what the narrator would sound like with the different punctuations and pauses that he uses within his story. When the author writes, “nervous—very—very, dreadfully...the disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them” allows the readers imagine the narrator transitioning from a somewhat calm tone to a mysterious and confused tone (3). Another use of aural imagery that leaves the reader in suspense is when Poe lets the readers know how the narrator is first going about his plan to murder the old man. The narrator states that he “undid the lantern cautiously-oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)” the readers can automatically hear the hinges

of the lantern creaking and instantaneously become nervous as the thought that the old man may hear the noise arises in their mind (4). Also when the narrator mentions the beating of the old man's heart as "grew louder, louder!" the reader is able to imagine the loud beating of a heart in a quiet room, creating even more suspense during that moment (6).

Another method of keeping the suspense throughout the story is the use of sentence structure and punctuation within the story. The author uses many short sentences and pauses that allow the reader to imagine what the narrator is up to. For example, when Poe writes, "But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless" it gives readers the feel that they have switched roles with the narrator and that the reader has become the one that is in the room trying not to move—not to make noise (6). The serious tone mixed with the short sentence structure allow the reader to realize that the situation has become entirely too real.

One of the more obvious methods Poe used to keep readers in suspense was the constant changes in events that he would create. He is constantly creating new environments that the narrator is in. He is not only creating the different environments, but each time he makes them slightly more dangerous. For example, one of the most memorable changes in events used was that one night the narrator was scared to even breathe in the presence of the old man when he was secretly entering his room at night (6). Later on, there was a drastic change from being scared to not being scared at all and wanting to do nothing but get rid of the old man and his "Evil Eye" (4). The great change in the event that Poe created had not only the narrator, but also the readers feeling a great rush of adrenaline as the narrator became a

madman and was not thinking of getting caught in the act as he only had one thing running through his mind.

All the different methods that Poe used to write his story worked to keep the readers in a constant state of suspense. He constantly had the readers going from feeling nervous and paranoid as the narrator started telling his story, to anxiety and fear when the narrator finally confessed his crime. Not only are the readers able to imagine what the narrator looked like at certain moments in the story, but they were also able to hear him speak, hear the old man's heart beating rapidly, and feel the madness running through the narrators mind. The use of suspense throughout the story successfully allowed the readers to interchange roles with the narrator making them feel like they were assisting the narrator as he murdered the old man and "deposited [his body] all between the scantlings" (7).

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.