Alani Battle

2/10/17

ENGL 203-06

Dr. Miller

The Tell-Tale Heart Analysis

Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a short story focused on the topic of guilt. Through the use of plot, indirect characterization, and the changes in mood, we are able to see what I believe outlines the theme that guilt will literally tear away at you to the point that you confess your wrongdoings.

The plot of this story starts out a bit slow, building up the intensity in the narrator that leads him to committing the heinous crime. It starts out with the narrator explaining how he was basically going insane from the idea of the old man’s piercing eye looking at him. Over the course of a week, the narrator goes up to the man’s room at midnight waiting for the right time to strike, but failing to find one each time. On the last night, he finally gets his chance when his accidental movement wakes the old man, allowing the narrator to see the eye. The anger welled inside him and that anger led to him killing the man, freeing himself from the misery the eye put him in.

After killing the man, the narrator goes to bury him under the floorboards and almost immediately after, the police show up. Because the narrator is so satisfied with his cleanup skills, he isn’t phased by the thought of the officer's finding the body; however, once the guilt starts to set in, he begins going insane yet again. As that guilt rises, the narrator claims to be able to hear the heartbeat of the dead man; however the reader can imply it’s only inside of his head because it is stated that the officers don’t seem to notice it. At the very end of the story, the guilt is so strong that he ends up confessing his deeds to the officers. This describes the theme originally mentioned by showing how the course of the narrator's growing guilt led him to telling the officers that he killed the old man.

Another interesting viewpoint on this story was seen by John Chua in his analysis of *The Tell-Tale Heart*. He picked up the idea that maybe the old man wasn’t a different person at all. He suspected that Poe used this character to describe another ego of the narrator. He shows this by stating that the narrator tends to experience some of the same things as the old man like the groans they both share and how the narrator stated that he knew that sound really well. (Chua, 2016) He then goes on to talk about how since the man is solely another representation of the narrator, the eye that he hates so much is basically the soul of the narrator. When he gets so angry and kills the man so he doesn’t have to deal with the eye, he’s actually just destroying himself. (Chua, 2016)

From this interpretation, we can begin to see how guilt plays a huge role in the story. Instead of feeling the guilt towards killing the old man, he actually feels this guilt towards destroying himself. Since he had those feelings towards his self conscience, he felt upset that he felt the need to destroy it instead of perhaps working out his issues. In this scenario, maybe the police represent his good self. They came in after he wronged himself and talked with him in hopes of manipulating him to see what’s right. When they first arrived, he said “for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome.” (Poe, 77) No matter what, any other person that had committed a crime and had police show up at their door would be at least a little terrified; however, the narrator wasn’t phased at all. This could help show how the police officers probably weren’t police officers in the literal sense. If you think about it, the narrator thought up the heartbeat in his imagination. It makes you wonder how much of the rest of the story was also just a figment of his imagination. This helps satisfy what Chua was trying to describe in his analysis and also shows how guilt played a big role in this story.

Another element that helps outline this theme is indirect characterization. Throughout the story, we are shown examples of the narrator experiencing guilt as he comes to his senses with the murder. The story states “The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted familiar things. But ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted.” (Poe, 77) From this passage, we can see how the narrator slowly begins feeling the guilt build up as he becomes more anxious. The color drained from his face signalling that he was starting to stress out about the situation and where at first, he was fine with the officers there, he now couldn’t stand them being there. Next, he finally cracks as he thinks the officers are messing with him. He truly believed that they could also hear the heartbeat of the old man. “They heard! They suspected! They knew! They were making a mockery of my horror! This I thought, and this I think.” (Poe, 78) This is the point where the narrator actually admits to his deed, ending the story. From the actions of the narrator towards the end, we see how he grew to feel that guilt that forced him to confess his actions even though he would’ve gotten away with it because the officers thought he was innocent.

Lastly, the changes in mood can also be used to show the theme. The story itself can be outlined with three moods: suspicion, anger, and guilt. The suspicion comes into play during the beginning of the story where the narrator first begins his quest of planning the death of the man. He almost gives off a sarcastic vibe in the sense that he always makes it seem as if nothing happened during the nights where he watched the man. He would always ask how the man slept through the night even though he knew. “And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night.” (Poe, 75) The next mood we see is anger, once he finally gets to the 8th night and he’s about to kill the man. “I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me - the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man’s hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room.” (Poe, 76) We see how anxious and angry the narrator is and how quick he is to jump on the old man to kill him. The action is done with such a quick motion that he doesn’t even give it a second thought. His only motive was to never have to see that piercing eye anymore.

After this action, we come to the last mood, and what I believe to be the topic of the story, guilt. As stated before the guild set in after the narrator kills the old man; however, it doesn’t necessarily become evident until after he has spent time convincing the officers that there was no crime committed. Even though this mood is shown for the least amount of time in the story, it’s the most impactful. The first two moods are only building up to the idea of guilt.

Overall, we see that the idea of overcoming guilt and confessing your wrongdoings was a huge idea shown throughout Poe’s “*The Tell-Tale Heart”.* Through the use of different literary elements, he was able to describe how different aspects of the story were able to come together around that centralized theme. This doesn’t mean there are many other themes that could be interpreted from this story. This was just the theme that I felt was particularly prominent. Even though the theme wasn’t directly seen until the very end of the story, it’s what takes the plot to a whole different height.

Works Cited

Chua, John. "An overview of 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'." *Gale Online Encyclopedia*, Gale, 2016. *Literature Resource Center*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GLS&sw=w&u=viva\_lwc\_main&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CH1420007894&it=r&asid=d75b65ea9c11bbc664607fd7c35d61da. Accessed 8 Feb. 2017.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Gold-bug and Other Tales*. New York: Dover Publications, 1991. Print.