



Mind-Style in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Cassie Hillerby

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* has invited a multitude of literary interpretation and criticism since its publication in 1843 to the present day. A predominant focus of existing literature is on the narrator-protagonist's state of mind, and the way in which this acts as a catalyst to the events described in the tale. The captivation with Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, heralded by Poe's contemporaries and critics alike as 'surely one of his near-perfect tales' (Hoffman, 1972), has continuously commanded attention for the complex psyche of its narrator, and his arguably incomprehensible state of mind. The consensus among the majority of criticism is that the narrator's actions would constitute insanity (Rein, 1960; Gargano, 1970), although there are certain analyses, notably more recent re-visitations of the work, that dissent from this assertion and choose instead to focus on rationalising the thoughts of the narrator in the minimal context that we are given (Shen, 2008; Alber et. al., 2010).

A fundamental aspect of attempting to understand and engage with any characterisation is by means of empathy. Narratological theory discussing the role of empathy in a readers' interpretation has culminated in recent years into a Theory of Mind (or ToM). ToM can be divided into two main, not necessarily opposing or mutually exclusive, models of reading — simulation and theory-theory. Simulation Theory invokes a sense of assuming the position of a character being described, or the narrator telling the story, in order to understand their motives, desires, actions, and so on. In other terms, 'simulation is concerned with seeing the world from another's perspective. This is what the reader has to do for fictional minds. The fictional world cannot be understood except from the point of view of the characters' (Palmer, 2004). Theory-theory alternately suggests that a reader formulates their understanding of a character by means of deploying certain internalised traits that they associate with a particular behaviour. In other words, 'it is the virtue of knowing such things as: the relationship between line of vision, attention, and perception...that one is able to predict and explain the actions of others' (Carruthers, 1996). Both of these theories are derived from a cognitive psychological understanding of real-life mind reading, and are adapted and applied in a literary context, providing a tool by which to understand readers' relation and reaction to a text.

In order to best understand Poe's story in terms of how a person would read the character of the narrator, it is necessary to further elucidate the terms of simulation and theory-theory. Simulation according to Palmer (2004) is 'pretending to have the same initial desires, beliefs, and mental states as the other person'. It is problematic to emphasise this level of 'pretence' when attempting to identify the motives and desires of a character for a number of reasons. Stockwell (2009) indicates that 'there is no bounded edge to the radial structure of our personality, only less and less good examples of how we think of ourselves'. On this premise, characters such as Poe's narrator are close to impossible to read; for most readers, the character is so far removed from how we think of ourselves, that attempting to adopt his desires, his beliefs, and his mental state would be essentially redundant, as we are

very unlikely to share these. The level of empathy we can experience with this character — for the majority of readers, at least — is essentially zero, thereby implicating the simulation model as being useful only when a character is not too far removed from our view of ourselves. The simulation theory therefore relies too closely on internalised perceptions to be useful when pursuing the mind-style of *The Tell-Tale Heart*'s narrator.

Theory-theory alternately can be understood in a more externalist sense, as 'the sole interpretative device we have for examining our own internal mental states...that is based on our observation of others' (Palmer, 2004). This therefore incorporates aspects of what we perceive about others in order to formulate rationales and understandings of fictional characters — in this instance, Poe's narrator. However, this theory is also underpinned by 'the virtue of knowing things such as...background knowledge, and belief...desire, and intention...[allowing] one...to predict and explain the actions of others' (Carruthers, 1996). In tales such as Poe's, given their conciseness, aestheticism, and purely subjective characterisation, we are arguably unable to access these aspects in a sense that could contribute to our overall impression of a character. Theory-theory appears to be characterised by a spectatorial position adopted by the reader. This is a process more feasible in third-person narration with multiple 'round' characters. From these brief definitions it is relatively clear that these models are too narrow in scope to be pertinent in reading Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Characterisation such as that made by Poe in the instance of *The Tell-Tale Heart*'s narrator should be regarded with more scepticism about the world in which he inhabits than many critics offer, as numerous points in the story offer an indication that we are being presented with a world different from our own. We are given such a narrow frame of the fictional world that the narrator and his victim inhabit, that simply assuming their world — including especially the rationales of the characters — works on the same terms as ours, and would be short-sighted in gaining an understanding of the text. By employing our most standard characterisation techniques of simulation and/or theory-theory, we in actuality disengage further from that which we are trying to relate to. There would be visible limitations characterised by the distinction between empathy and sympathy, whereby we are able only to experience the latter, i.e. feeling an emotion for a character, rather than experiencing their emotions ourselves. This process of de-empathisation I would argue occurs most commonly in texts within the tradition of magical realism, for example the works of Gabriel García Márquez, or psychological narratives such as Poe's, whereby the reader engages in the actual story to a greater extent due to the motives of the characters not being readily available. A number of alternate interpretations based upon extracts of *The Tell-Tale Heart*'s original text are offered below, commencing in the vein of marked psychological difference, in order to demonstrate the degrees to which limiting both Poe's text world and the characters' desires and motivations can hinder a thorough reading.

The existing frameworks outlined above become problematic when we attempt to understand and comprehend the actions of characters — and to some extent, of individuals in real life — whose thought processes are too far removed from our own. These ordinary modes of empathetic interaction become redundant when the complexities of a characters' rationale are incomprehensible to us. Poe's narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a culmination of this. It is evident in as little as the first line of Poe's story that both of these modes of reading give us little access to the actual character, and in turn the literary world that he inhabits. A close reading of the opening of *The Tell-Tale Heart* will demonstrate the models of simulation and theory-theory as being inadequate in perceiving the events described by the narrator:

'True! --nervous --very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?' (Poe, 2006)

The immediate exclamation of 'True!' ironically forces the reader into immediate doubts about the legitimacy of the account that follows. The narrator then invokes his 'nervous[ness]', and subsequently premodifies this adjectival by insisting twice on the intensity of this feeling ('very') and darkening the nervousness by invoking the 'dreadful[ness]'. This instantly undermines any notion that — until this point — the narrator's self-attributed nervous disposition could be the result of a more positive sense of nervous excitement, for example. The reader already has an accomplice to the projected image of unease, and the beginnings of a confession marked by the narrator's lack of assurance. Poe's narrator goes on to explain that 'he had been and [is still]' nervous, indicating in the first instance that what we are being told is through the eyes of a character, rather than an omniscient narrator. This also indicates that we are soon likely to be introduced to the catalyst of this emotion. What follows is an interrogative to a seemingly imagined judge, or implied reader or audience: 'why will you say that I am mad?' The immediate tangentiality of the narrator's speech, overall nervous disposition, and inference of his own insanity — albeit a negation of it — forces any reader, whether natural or critical, to question the integrity of both the events that follow, and the lens through which they are being told. We begin by building the composite outlined in the notion of theory-theory, ascribing a sense of nervousness to this protagonist-narrator, only to be pushed through a simulation of his mental state '*I had been and am*' (emphasis mine), to be then popped back out to the very detached state of an observer as we are directly addressed in 2nd person 'but why will *you* say that I am mad?' (emphasis mine).

Earlier theoretical accounts of Poe's tale base their assessments and analyses around these initial assertions of the narrator's insanity. For example in Hoffman (1972), the critic claims, 'When a narrator commences in *this* vein, we know him to be mad already' (original emphasis). Reflexive reactions such as this enable only a very narrow reading of this text, as our view of the narrator is immediately one infringed upon by their own schematic sense of what constitutes 'insanity'. We thus read the text on the basis that the narrator is insane, and any speech acts or events described attest to this and affirm our existing belief that he is mentally unstable. Our 'knowing' established by the narrator is, at this stage, entirely dependent on the speech that he has opted for. We, in actuality, know nothing of his character, historical past, relation to others; in essence, the world in which he inhabits. However, it is entirely reasonable for any natural reader to make these initial judgements by means of simulation or theory-theory. As is demonstrated above, the reader is invited to use both of these approaches intermittently at this early stage of the narrative.

The aspects that constitute a plot discourse can be divided into two main features, as indicated in Keen (2007), and can be readily applied to *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The first being narrative situation, in other words 'the nature of the mediation between author and reader, including the person of the narration, the implicit location of the narrator, the relation of the narrator to the characters, and the internal or external perspective on characters'. The other aspect is character identification, which includes 'naming, description, indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness'. The fundamental difference between these modes of presentation is that the author has more influence over the way the information is received in the former aspect; how a reader responds to the identification of a character is to an extent beyond the author's control.

In order to fully understand the methods by which Poe constructs his worlds, it is necessary to begin at the macro level of the construct itself. Critics who have offered

interpretation of *The Tell-Tale Heart* have largely asserted — though often not explicitly — that the pathologies of the narrator are to be understood through a lens of real-world narrative. That is to say that, those events depicted are occurring in a world that is a reflection of our own. This is problematic in the sense that there is no real evidence that the events being recounted are transpiring in a knowable world; or, to the same extent, in an unknowable one. In turn, the reader adopts a presumptuous attitude with regards to the location of this text; for example Poe's use of recognizable settings 'old house', 'chamber', 'bed' and so on, are all proponents of viewing this narrative as a parallel discourse to our world, albeit incredibly flat examples. This enables the question as to whether, in cases such as these where setting is given minimal attention, a reader should automatically assume that they are observing a world identical to their own. Additionally, Gargano (1970) posits, 'Poe, in allowing his narrator to disburden himself of his tale, skilfully contrives to show also that he lives in a haunted and eerie world of his own demented making', implying that any otherworldliness found in the narrative can be attributed to the narrator's own interiority, rather than the external activity and events that he participates in. This further demonstrates a critical view of Poe's narrator as disassociated from the space that he occupies, and in essence a disregard of Poe's text-world.

One of the main issues with reading interiorised, psychological narrations such as Poe's is the imposition of certain beliefs by the reader onto the canvas of the story-world. Palmer (2004) names this 'intentional stance, as being the strategy of interpreting the behaviour of an entity...by treating it as if it were a rational agent who governed its "choice" of "action" by a "consideration" of its "beliefs" and "desires" ... The intentional stance is the attitude or perspective we routinely adopt towards one another'. This demonstrates the degree to which readers see fictional minds as they see real ones, and the limitations of this. By simply viewing a fictional character's mind as one analogous to real-life, readers circumscribe certain rationales that may not exist in the text-world. This 'intentional stance' is almost reflexive, but can cause interpretations of a text that are in fact excessively bound to our own subjectivity. It is thus apparent that 'some readers impose on the text character constructions that are discordant with the text' (Keen, 2011). This would account for the disregarding of certain instances of non-normality, including the narrator's precision when holding the lantern and hearing the old man's heartbeat after it has supposedly stopped beating.

The narrator is often seen to be eager to invoke the temporality of the story, particularly in statements such as 'a watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine'. The careful composition of Poe's tale is itself a telling indication of its movement away from 'natural' narration. Our minds as readers move chronologically, at a constant pace, within the boundaries governed by time. Poe's tale, as per references to watches and clocks, deliberate repetition and implicit comparatives — 'quicker, quicker...louder, louder', in fact largely inverts the structured notion of time by manipulating reading pace and subsequent relation to the text. What this essentially creates is a dissonance between the consistent time with which we are familiar, and the seeming slowing and speeding of time in Poe's text world. This is not to say that all narratives that use this method of storytelling are attempting to alter their readers' perception of time; it is often symptomatic of the stream-of-consciousness narrative, whereby we are not taken through the narrator's thoughts at a consistent pace. Rather, there is a self-conscious effort by Poe, punctuated clearly throughout the narrative, to engage the reader to such an extent that they are at once immersed in the narrator's confession, and only able to spectate from outside of the world. Aside from blatant description indicating so, temporal difference is arguably one of the most prominent examples of portraying a world not fully comprehensible to us; one outside of our immediate grasp of reality. These structural differences are a reflection of the mind-style of Poe's

narrator; it can be ascertained that unnatural minds are only fully expressed and accounted for when they exist within a world demonstrating a degree of non-normality.

The narrator's deduction of the mind of the old man can be disregarded as a further expression of his illusion, in-keeping with some aspects of his previous speech:

‘I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or grief -- oh no!’

It is important when examining mind reading between a reader and character to also address the perceived psychological relation between the characters within a text, whether accurate or not. The narrator allegedly understands the sound vaguely articulated by the old man — a groan, which the protagonist names as one of ‘mortal terror’. We are told that this exact sound ‘has welled up [in the narrator’s] own bosom...[he] knew what the old man felt’. The narrator in this instance appears able to read the mind of the old man using a technique of simulation, indicating that he can feel empathy — or at least believes himself to be able to. In discussing the role of a narrator more generally, Benfey (1993) suggests, ‘it does seem as though [the narrator] is imagining someone else’s pain on the model of [his] own’. Benfey’s point is especially important with regards to *The Tell-Tale Heart*, since this narrator is not simply imagining the old man’s pain but, as he is an actual person and participant in the text, can relate to experiencing the pain himself. The narrator then goes on to say that he ‘pitied [the old man], although [he] chuckled at heart’; such an unnatural response would reckon Poe’s narrator insane. The narrator’s psychological discernment of the old man is, for the purposes of mind modelling, secondary to his perception of self. Numerous critical accounts have pathologised the narrator’s character in an attempt to comprehend his criminal motives (see Davidson, 1957; Benfey, 1993). Adjectival responses to the characterisation of the narrator include ‘callous’, ‘calculating’, ‘god-player’, and so on. These are in alignment with prior standard models of mind reading only — that is, attributing our own perception of what constitutes ‘emotional response’ to the characters in the text.

‘Death in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim’. Syntactically, this aspect of the narrative is particularly difficult to follow. Poe’s characterisation to this point has rendered the only two characters in the narrative nameless, faceless, and without any distinguishing physical features. As such, the pronoun use of ‘him...his...him’, followed by the abstract ‘victim’ becomes confused in terms of their referential. Naturally, given the previous speech patterning, we would assume that all of these refer to the old man. However, they can in actuality be read in a number of ways, such as the personification of ‘Death’ as an exterior entity that is neither the narrator nor the old man. Given the deictic centrality of the narrator, it would be highly plausible for the ‘black shadow before him’ to be a supernatural force infringing on the narrator’s psyche. It is this degree of ambiguity used by Poe that allows the reader to explore other means of comprehending not only the mind-style of his characters, but also their text world. A natural reading may make assumptions about this based on both previous knowledge of traits (theory-theory) or personal experience in that situation (simulation), but neither of these necessarily enables a complete understanding. These models of reading are non-problematic in a standard literary tradition, in which the author is either using an omniscient third-person narrator to present the events of the text, characters that are described and actively engaging with the events and settings around them, or to some extent a mentally coherent first-person narrator. However, as Zunshine (2006) has highlighted, characters with an indication of mental difference are far more difficult to read. Zunshine, as well as Baron-Cohen (1986) and others, have used the example of autism, and Mark Haddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of The Dog in The Night Time* as a popularised account of this, to demonstrate the scope of

differences in mind-style. Attempting to read the mind of Poe's narrator who is considered by the reader to be 'insane' — whether accurate or not — is an entirely impossible exercise. This is highlighted by the available models of mind reading — simulation and theory-theory — as being inadequate in dealing with mental difference. Purely on the basis of narratorial form, the homodiegetic narration of *The Tell-Tale Heart* encourages a simulation-based reading by placing oneself in the position of the narrator. Further, the deictic expression enabled by Poe's use of first-person narration 'can contribute to the projection of fictional minds that appear to work in 'nonstandard' or 'unorthodox' ways' (Semino, 2011). The mode of narration achieves this on two levels; first, it exemplifies the egocentricity of the character that we are reading, and, as Semino continues, 'the ego of the encoder represents the center of orientation'. These aspects are both important in terms of the ways that the reader can engage with the text, and to what extent they can fully 'know' about the events that transpire within it.

Existing criticism focuses almost exclusively on the state of mind of *The Tell-Tale Heart*'s narrator; whether or not he is perceived to be insane, or whether his act of murder and subsequent attempt to convince the reader of his mental stability can in fact be attributed to the mind of a sane man. We as readers are positioned throughout the narrative in a deictic centre that is exactly approximate to the narrator; he is the source of all information received by the reader, and can manipulate his recollection of events, emotions, and perceived traits at will; everything that we come to understand in terms of the events of the tale, the narrator's actions — and those of the old man — are through a specific lens, one which readers have little comprehension of. The narrator exhibits a lack of believability throughout the narrative, not least when he is attempting to find a motive for his murder; 'I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!' The sudden movement between the subjunctive mood of 'I think' to the certainty exclaimed in 'yes, it was this' would indicate a lack of conviction in the narrator's words. It would appear that the value judgements made on this narrator as being insane are made entirely on the picture painted before us by the narrator himself. Zunshine (2006) suggests — with particular accuracy in terms of Poe's narrator — 'we import the figure of an unreliable narrator because we need to frame in familiar social terms a perceived pattern of textual ambiguities...projection of the unreliable narrator can be seen as a result of effect of the reader's pragmatic interpretation of textual elements within their specific literary context'. Zunshine's points are particularly important when approaching the mind-style in *The Tell-Tale Heart* (and other narratives with which we struggle to perceive) not purely for its association with the narrator, but for any 'textual ambiguities' we come across as readers that require comprehension in other terms. It is surely imperceptible that criticism which assumes simultaneously the narrator's insanity but also his unreliability is a logical conclusion and understanding of Poe's tale.

Taking into account those previously stated allusions to the non-reality of Poe's world, there becomes an increasing chance of the confession itself being entirely fictitious within the context of the narrative. That is to say that, what commences after the first paragraph of the narrative — everything subsequent to the narrator's volition of 'I can tell you the whole story', has every chance of being a figment of the narrator's imagination. This statement can also be implicated for its unreliable merit; the use of auxiliary 'can', expressing the narrator's ability to tell the story, but offering no guarantee that what we receive as readers is in fact the whole story — or even part of it. The elements of in-narrative fictionality are thus symptomatic of the narrative frame itself:

'When an utterance which is narrated at the second level is not perceptible, this is also an indication of fictionality, an indication that the narrated story is invented. If the narrator's realistic rhetoric seeks to keep up the pretence that it

relates true facts, it can never represent the thoughts of actors other than itself' (Bal 1997).

Bal's observation on the nature of embedded narratives allows us to draw some conclusions from Poe's method of presentation. 'The second level' that Bal refers to — that is, the story that is being confessed — is in some ways not perceptible, due largely to the unreliable nature of the narrator's utterances and his overall mind composite, as discussed previously. Continuing in this vein, there would therefore be an indication that the narrator's story could be just that; a story. Bal's allusion to 'realistic rhetoric' can be taken either way with regards to the narrator; whether his confession is realistic or not is a largely subjective question, depending on the nature of the reader and any prior dispositions they may have before reading the tale. Whether or not the confession is fictitious is largely irrelevant however; to be called into question on a macro-level is still an important inference.

When the true motivations of a character — particularly if said character is also the narrator — are not readily available to a reader, or if there is a belief that the reader is being misinformed, there is a tendency to either deflect to the author or to assume knowledge about the narrator; essentially searching for a source tag to which the reader can attribute meaning. In other words, 'to reject the narrator's words and reconstruct an alternative, the reader thus has to become aware of the missing source tag...and to reapply it' (Zunshine, 2006). For example, criticism that writes, 'the narrator thinks that', even when textual evidence is not necessarily available, simultaneously imposes a rationale that may not be apparent, as discussed previously, as well as potentially drawing false conclusions from a text. For example, it is entirely feasible to suggest that in actuality the narrator cannot hear the old man's heartbeat after the murder, but it could equally be pertained that the heart has continued beating, as the temporally dislocated narrative could allow. Alternately, the focus could implicate the author instead. Zunshine (2006) continues, '[criticism] will find a way to insinuate a source tag into its perception of a representation that is a metarepresentation'. Poe himself could therefore be imposed onto the figure of the narrator, as in Rein (1960):

'In 'The Tell-Tale Heart' the chief character, again based on Poe, is driven by an intense hostility which does not come from an outside stimulus but from a source within the man himself'

Implicating the author to this degree can further remove a reader from the story-world, and back to the realms of the real world that they inhabit. In some instances this is not necessarily a misdemeanour; however, it is arguable that this approach reduces literary immersion to a certain extent.

There are occasional aspects of this text that are unexplainable in real world terms, for example the narrator states, 'I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.' Indeed, if the bedroom were as dark as the narrator claims it to be, which it surely must be given his ability to stand in the doorway for an hour without being seen, the likelihood of being able to focus immediately on the 'evil eye' that haunts the narrator with one solitary beam of light is highly unlikely if we are to use conventional means of rationality and reasoning. It is thus an unexplainable facet of the text, not dissimilar from being able to hear the heartbeat of a decapitated person. If we cannot comprehend this instance, then we are no closer to uncovering the murderous intentions of the narrator either. It could therefore be contested that, traditionally, 'natural reading' in a narratological sense can to some extent be conflated with 'realistic reading', unless the narrative clearly infers an otherworldly presence. This is a process that can, in instances such as in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, marginalize potential readings

and characterisations outside of our immediate grasp and understanding. Alber et al. (2010) express this point exactly, stating,

‘While combinations of [ToM] with narratology have produced numerous important insights, we would argue that by imposing theories drawn from our knowledge of real-world minds on represented minds, we risk losing sight of some of the fundamental characteristics of narratives: that they may operate according to different logics’.

It is this point that *The Tell-Tale Heart* embodies; prior readings that have been excessively fixated on understanding the mind-style of the narrator through a real-world lens have arguably lost some aspects of Poe’s narrative. In order to derive a more accurate understanding of Poe’s narrator, a reader would need to view both the events that transpire in *The Tell-Tale Heart* and the text-world setting as being to a certain degree otherworldly, and thus not comprehensible by using the standard models of Theory of Mind. The existing frameworks appear to only emulate readings considered ‘natural’, and are limited when accounting for mind-styles that, for example, do not necessarily align with the text world they inhabit; or are so far removed from our own world that we cannot empathise with their thought process and the resulting action.

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