

## **The Rationality and Irrationality of Poe's Character in the story "The Tell - Tale Heart"**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the mental condition of the character of the story The Tell-Tale Heart of Edgar Allan Poe. The narrator of the story known as the principal character seems to be absolutely rational in the beginning of the story and he is over conscious of hiding the facts of his murdering the old man. He has attempted for seven nights and he murdered the old man on the eighth night. He disembarked the body into pieces and put under the planks and he has made even the police officer believe that he is out of guilt and it is his acute hearing capacity has turned his rationality into irrationality and thinking that the police officers have been mocking him and he has opened the facts of his crime by confessing the murder of the old man. The research has been carried out with the detail analysis of the primary data of the story The Tell-Tale Heart and the various related articles have been used as the secondary data of the research. Freudian psychological theory has become analogue through the lance of analyzing it.

*Keywords:* explore, fragile, investigate, insane, psyche

### **Introduction**

Edgar Allan Poe's "*The Tell-Tale Heart*" stands as a haunting exploration of the human psyche, offering a rich examination of the interplay between rationality and irrationality. The story features a narrator who is both driven by a methodical and calculated desire to commit murder, yet simultaneously consumed by delusions and overwhelming emotions that eventually lead to his downfall. This tension between

rational thought and irrational behavior is central to the narrative and serves to illuminate the complex nature of the human mind, particularly under the strain of guilt and obsession. Throughout the tale, Poe masterfully manipulates the unreliable narrator, forcing readers to question the nature of his sanity and the extent to which his actions can be considered rational.

The narrator begins by insisting on his sanity, describing in detail the careful planning and execution of the murder of the old man, whom he insists was not harmed by any personal animosity but rather by the irrational fixation on the old man's eye. Yet, as the story progresses, his increasing paranoia and delusions, particularly the imagined sound of the old man's beating heart, expose the collapse of his rationality. This contrast between the narrator's logical assertions and his irrational actions creates a profound sense of ambiguity about his true mental state, making him one of the most memorable examples of an unreliable narrator in Gothic literature (Sova, 2001).

Poe's exploration of the fragile boundary between rational thought and irrational compulsion is not only a critical component of this particular story but also a recurring theme throughout much of his oeuvre. By dissecting the tension between reason and madness, "*The Tell-Tale Heart*" reflects broader societal concerns of Poe's time regarding the fragility of the human mind, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing world in the early 19th century (Eddings, 2017). Through this lens, Poe's story invites readers to examine the nuances of human behavior, questioning how rationality and irrationality coexist in moments of intense emotional and psychological strain.

Edgar Allan Poe's "*The Tell-Tale Heart*" has long been a subject of critical analysis, particularly with respect to the complex nature of its narrator, whose fluctuating rationality and irrationality form the cornerstone of the story's psychological horror. Scholars have long debated the delicate balance Poe strikes between reason and madness in his characters, particularly the unnamed narrator in this tale, who insists on his sanity while describing acts of irrational violence. This literature review examines the critical discourse surrounding the tension between rationality and irrationality in "*The Tell-Tale Heart*," focusing on various interpretations of the narrator's psyche and the narrative strategies Poe uses to blur the boundaries between sanity and madness.

Many scholars argue that Poe's narrator uses rationality as a façade to mask his deep-seated irrationality. According to Sova (2001), the narrator's insistence on his

methodical approach to murder—carefully planning and executing the crime with precision—serves as an illusion of sanity, designed to convince the audience of his control over the situation. However, as the story progresses, his inability to suppress his guilty conscience and his heightened emotional responses betray his unstable mental state. This contradiction suggests that rationality, in the narrator's case, is not a true reflection of his inner workings but rather a desperate attempt to mask his unraveling psyche.

The concept of the unreliable narrator has been central to many interpretations of *"The Tell-Tale Heart."* Critics like Davidson (2007) assert that the narrator's self-proclaimed rationality is a direct indicator of his insanity. The very fact that he needs to justify his actions through such elaborate reasoning implies a disconnect from reality. As Davidson notes, the narrator's "perfectly logical" explanations for his crime—from the dispassionate description of the murder to his obsessive focus on the old man's eye—are undermined by the absurdity of his motivation. The narrator's gradual descent into madness is revealed not through overt violence but through the subtle erosion of his reason, culminating in his confession prompted by the imagined heartbeat of the murdered man.

A significant body of work on *"The Tell-Tale Heart"* explores how guilt plays a crucial role in the unraveling of the narrator's rational mind. As Eddings (2017) argues, the narrator's obsession with the old man's eye and the subsequent murder is not merely an act of premeditated violence, but a manifestation of his internal psychological conflict. The heartbeat he hears after the murder symbolizes the overpowering force of guilt that ultimately drives him to madness. This auditory hallucination, which he insists is "real," becomes an external manifestation of his irrational mind. In this way, Poe highlights the idea that guilt can corrupt reason and push an individual toward irrational behavior, even when they believe themselves to be in control.

Poe's exploration of rationality versus irrationality in *"The Tell-Tale Heart"* reflects broader Gothic literary traditions, where characters often grapple with the thin line between reason and madness. Punter (2000) suggests that the Gothic genre thrives on this instability, and in the case of Poe's work, the narrator's struggle between rational thought and irrational behavior is a means to explore the fragility of the human mind. Punter argues that this duality creates a sense of unease for the reader, as the narrator's grip on reality continually slips, and their rational actions become increasingly intertwined with delusional thinking. This duality, Punter

concludes, is essential to the terror of "*The Tell-Tale Heart*" and similar works of the period, as it reveals the inherent vulnerability of the human psyche.

The philosophical implications of rationality and irrationality in Poe's narrative have also been a focus of recent scholarship. Scholars such as Griest (2014) highlight how Poe plays with the concept of rationality, using the narrator's obsession with "proof" of his sanity to reflect a broader existential anxiety. Griest contends that the narrator's fixation on his ability to "reason" his actions reflect a desire for control in an inherently chaotic and irrational world. This desire for control ultimately becomes his undoing, as his inability to master his internal irrational forces leads him into madness and, paradoxically, to his confession.

### **Statement of Problem**

The scholars and critics Griest (2014), Punter (2000), Eddings (2017), Davidson (2007) and Sova (2001) have argued from various vantagepoints regarding the rationality and irrationality of Poe's character in the story *The Tell Tale Heart* but they have not dealt about character's rational and irrational aspects in depth. It is; therefore, the research has attempted to explore the answer of the following research questions.

- A. How does the narrator as a character act rationally in the story "The Tell Tale Heart?"
- B. What are the characteristics that the narrator as a character represent himself as the insane one in the story "The Tell Tale Heart?"

### **Objectives of the research**

The general objectives of the research are to investigate the role and behaviors of the narrator as a character in the story *The Tell Tale Heart*. But the specific objectives are:

- A. To investigate how the narrator as a character act rationally in the story "The Tell Tale Heart".
- B. To explore the various characteristics that the narrator as a character represent himself as the insane one in the story "The Tell Tale Heart".

### **Research Methodology**

To achieve the research objectives, this study has collected historical data through content analysis, drawing on primary data from *The Tell- Tale Heart* and

secondary data from relevant academic journal articles. A library-based method was used for gathering historical data, a technique recognized by Hamzah (2019) as highly effective for qualitative research and exploring theoretical foundations. In a similar vein, Kurniawan et al. (2023) utilized this method for historical data collection. This research follows a comparable approach to investigate the historical perspectives on social structures and gender inequality as depicted in *The Tell Tale Heart*.

To further support the research objectives, thematic passages from *The Tell Tale Heart* are gathered, considering literary sources as significant qualitative data. Consistent with Abidin and Laskar's (2020) viewpoint, this study emphasizes that analyzing historical texts involves more than just reviewing their content; it also requires interpreting the deeper meanings within the text. Furthermore, ensuring the alignment between textual and contextual analysis is essential for fully grasping the text's significance. In this context, *The Tell- Tale Heart* proves to be a crucial resource for exploring various aspects of social structures that reinforced male dominance in traditional societies. The research uses content analysis, incorporating both primary and secondary sources, to conduct a comprehensive investigation.

The secondary data sources for this study include library resources, gender studies, research papers, and relevant texts, with the primary focus being on library-based research. Since direct observation of the ancient societal structure is not possible, the study is based on the premise that every social system has historical origins. Historical data are collected through content analysis of *The Thousand Splendid Suns* and secondary sources from academic journals. As highlighted by Hamzah (2019) and Kurniawan et al. (2023), this method is especially effective in qualitative research for examining theoretical foundations. This approach is applied in this study to analyze gender roles within *The Thousand Splendid Suns*. Additionally, the methodology involves analyzing both primary and secondary data from various journals and sources related to the depiction of women in the primary text. This approach follows the methodology used by Adhikari (2020, 2024), Adhikari et al. (2020, 2022), and other researchers, who employed qualitative research methods (e.g., Adhikari, <https://doi.org/10.3126/kv.v5i1.70884>, <https://doi.org/10.3126/taj.v3i1.71972>, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.25058/179400x.1709>, [www.ijtell.com](http://www.ijtell.com), & [www.ijoes.in](http://www.ijoes.in)). Similarly, Adhikari et al. (2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10-15294/paramita.V34i.47901>, 2024 <http://dx.doi.org/10-15294/paramita.V34i.50309>) and Guragain et al. (2024 DOI:

10.59324/ejtas.2024.2(5).07, 2024 [www.tijer.org](http://www.tijer.org)., DOI: 10.59324/ejtas.2024.2(4).20, 2024 [www.GRPUBLISHING.ORG](http://www.GRPUBLISHING.ORG), 2024 <https://doi.org/10.18535/sshj.v8i09.1295>, 2024 doi:10.29121/granthaalayah.v12.i7.2024.5687, 2024 [www.journal-ems.com](http://www.journal-ems.com) DOI: 10.59573/emsj.8(2).2024.35, 2(3), 1-5, DOI: 10.59324/stss.2025.2(3).xx) have also used similar research methodologies in their qualitative studies, aligning with the approach taken in this paper for an in-depth analysis of the primary text data.

### **Theory of psychology**

Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* offers rich ground for analysis through the lens of Freudian (1911) psychoanalysis, particularly in relation to concepts such as the unconscious mind, repression, guilt, and the id, ego, and superego. The narrator's apparent rationality -as he repeatedly insists that he is not mad- contrasts sharply with his irrational actions, suggesting an internal conflict driven by unconscious desires and repressed guilt. His fixation on the old man's eye and his subsequent murder of him can be interpreted as an expression of his id, driven by primal urges and irrational impulses. However, the narrator's obsessive insistence on his sanity and meticulous planning of the murder reflect the influence of the ego, which seeks to control these irrational desires. The narrator's eventual breakdown and confession can be seen as a manifestation of the superego, which represents the internalized moral standards and guilt.

In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator's internal conflict between his rational mind and his irrational actions can be analyzed using Freud's theories of repression and guilt. His obsession with the old man's eye and his attempts to justify his actions highlight his inner turmoil and the dominance of unconscious impulses over his conscious mind. The final breakdown, where he confesses to the crime after hearing the beating of the old man's heart, illustrates the overwhelming power of guilt and the unconscious mind in the Freudian model.

### **Rationality of the Character in *The Tell-Tale Heart***

In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator insists throughout the story that he is perfectly sane, despite his actions and their consequences suggesting otherwise. The conflict between his claims of rationality and his behavior forms the central tension of the story. A close examination of the narrator's thoughts, actions, and justifications offers insights into his self-perception of rationality. The following analysis explores this rationality through various subtopics:

## The Narrator's Perception of His Own Sanity

From the very beginning of the story, the narrator begins with a claim of rationality: "True! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" (Poe, 1843). This statement establishes the central paradox of the character: while he insists on his sanity, the reader soon learns that his actions are far from rational. This self-proclamation indicates the narrator's awareness of how others might perceive him, yet he is unable to recognize the madness of his behavior. His attempt to justify his actions with elaborate reasoning suggests that he views his actions as logical and well-planned.

The narrator claims his motivation for murder is a simple one: the old man's "vulture-eye," which he finds so horrifying that it drives him to madness. His perception of the eye as something malevolent and dangerous seems irrational, yet he continues to argue that his decision to kill the old man is reasonable, as he is trying to rid himself of this perceived threat. The insistence on his sanity, despite his obsession and irrational behavior, demonstrates a detachment from reality.

## The Methodical Planning and Execution of the Murder

Despite the narrator's irrational motivations, he demonstrates a highly methodical approach to the murder. For example, he carefully watches the old man for several nights before carrying out the act. He describes his actions with precision: *"I went to work. I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him."* (Poe, 1843).

This methodical approach to the murder—waiting for the right moment, ensuring that no one was awake, and committing the crime at night—demonstrates a calculated and strategic mind. He is deliberate in his planning and execution, which would typically be considered a rational behavior. The fact that he believes this meticulousness is evidence of his sanity reveals his warped sense of logic.

The narrator's ability to conceal the crime, hiding the body beneath the floorboards, further demonstrates his logical and deliberate approach. He spends hours removing the evidence and cleaning up after the murder: "First of all, I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs." (Poe, 1843). This attention to detail reveals his focus on the execution of the crime, showing the narrator's belief, that rational thinking is at play, despite his obsessive drive to destroy the old man. His conscious act reveals that he is so much rational and he has got full reasoning faculties and he has properly hidden the dead body under the planks of the house. In other sense, his acts displays that he is one of the professional

murderers and he knows how to hide his criminal activities from the society and the authority.

### **The Narrator's Justifications and Perception of His Own Logic**

The narrator repeatedly justifies his actions as logical, claiming that his decision to murder the old man was the only reasonable one given his perception of the eye. He insists that he had no personal animosity toward the old man, stating:

*"It was not the old man who vexed me, but his eye. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!"* (Poe, 1843).

The narrator's claim that his reasoning is based on the eye alone seems almost absurd, yet he tries to present this as a rational explanation for murder. This fixation on the eye—a seemingly trivial detail—demonstrates how his rationality is influenced by his delusions and irrational thinking. The fact that he devotes so much energy to the eye and views it as the source of his distress shows that his logic is deeply flawed, yet he fails to see this. The narrator has claimed that there was no passion, nor was there any object of killing him. He has loved the old man who had never wronged him and neither the old man had ever insulted him and the narrator did not have the desire of the gold of the old man. But when the idea of the evil eye or the vulture eye of the old man entered his brain, then he did not even sleep for day and night because the thought of murdering the old man haunted him (Poe, 1883). It seems absurd act of the narrator though he has brought the rational reasoning in his logic.

### **The Role of Guilt and the Deterioration of Rationality**

As the story progresses, the narrator's rationality becomes more deeply intertwined with his unraveling mental state. After committing the murder, the narrator believes he has perfectly concealed his crime. He confidently entertains the police and presents himself as calm and collected, showing no sign of guilt. However, his rationality begins to falter as guilt slowly creeps in. The sound of the old man's heart, which he believes is still beating under the floorboards, becomes louder and louder. He describes:

*"It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! —no, no! They heard! —they suspected! —they knew! —they were making a mockery of my horror! —this I thought, and this I think."* (Poe, 1843).

The narrator's growing anxiety and paranoia show the collapse of his rationality under the weight of his guilt. The beating heart is a manifestation of his conscience,



and he cannot silence it. His actions become more frantic, and he eventually confesses to the murder, unable to cope with the irrational compulsion to reveal his crime. His belief that the sound is real, despite it being a product of his guilt-ridden mind, signals the complete breakdown of his rationality. It is the wrist watch of the old man that he had forgotten to take out of his wrist while burying the dead body under the planks and the sound of the wrist watch of the old man compelled him to confess his crime with the police officers.

### **Rationality and Irrationality in the Context of Madness**

The narrator's insistence on his sanity, despite his irrational thoughts and actions, can be viewed through the lens of psychological defense mechanisms, particularly denial and projection. By denying his madness and projecting blame onto the old man's eye, the narrator tries to maintain a semblance of control over his situation. This internal conflict—his belief in his rationality despite the overwhelming evidence of his madness—reveals the complex nature of his psyche. His desire to be seen as rational despite his irrational behaviors is indicative of the mental illness that permeates his consciousness. The narrator has claimed that he is not mad but nervous and he is able to hear everything about the heaven and earth and he even has argued that his nervousness has not destroyed his mind but it has sharpened and he has got the acute sense of hearing (Poe, 1843). In fact, it is his acute sense of hearing that has blinded his rationality and has led him to confess his crime. His arguments have been identified as the rational ones but his acts have displayed him irrational and insane one.

### **Irrationality of the Character in *The Tell-Tale Heart***

The narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe is a figure trapped in a cycle of irrational thought and behavior, which ultimately leads to his confession and demise. While the narrator insists on his sanity, his actions, thoughts, and justifications demonstrate profound irrationality. His behavior contradicts his claim of rationality and reveals the internal chaos he cannot control. In the following analysis, we will explore the various aspects of the narrator's irrationality, supported by textual evidence, to illustrate his mental unraveling.

### **Obsession with the Old Man's Eye**

The narrator's irrationality first becomes apparent in his obsessive fixation on the old man's eye. The eye, which he describes as a "vulture eye," becomes an all-consuming focus of his thoughts, and he perceives it as a symbol of evil that must be

destroyed. This fixation itself is irrational because the eye is a harmless physical feature, and the narrator is unable to explain why it disturbs him so much. He admits: *"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."* (Poe, 1843).

The idea that a mere eye can provoke such a deep and intense reaction speaks to the narrator's irrational obsession. He fails to recognize that the disturbance he feels is purely subjective, stemming from his own inner turmoil, and not a legitimate threat from the old man. The irrationality of this obsession is highlighted by the narrator's inability to articulate any logical reason for wanting to kill the old man, other than the eye. It has become strange for the exploration of the reality how the one eye is like of the eye of the vulture and not the next one.

### **The Narrator's Self-Justification of Murder**

Despite the irrational nature of his thoughts and actions, the narrator continually attempts to justify his murder of the old man as rational. He assures the reader that his actions were premeditated and carefully planned, emphasizing that he was not motivated by anger, but by a "calm" and "sagacious" desire to rid himself of the eye. He explains, *"I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! ... It was not the old man who vexed me, but his eye. I think it was his eye!"* (Poe, 1843). This repetition of his justification reveals the narrator's inability to recognize the illogical nature of his reasoning. He attributes his desire to kill the old man to something as trivial and irrational as an eye, which is, in itself, an irrational basis for murder. This also reflects how the narrator distorts reality to fit his delusional perceptions, which is a key characteristic of irrational thinking. The more the narrator tries to rationalize his actions, the clearer it becomes that his reasoning is based on an unfounded obsession rather than any logical, reasonable thought.

### **The Overemphasis on Methodical Execution**

The narrator insists that he is rational because he meticulously plans the murder, believing that this indicates a logical mind. He describes how he carefully and methodically watches the old man every night for seven nights, observing his eye to determine the right moment to act. The narrator claims, *"I went to work. I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him."* (Poe, 1843). This calm demeanor is another form of his irrationality. While his careful planning may appear rational on the surface, it reflects an obsession with the perfect execution of an irrational idea. The narrator is unable to recognize that no matter how precisely

he plans the murder, the motivation behind it remains illogical. His insistence on presenting himself as rational and in control of the situation underscores his inability to acknowledge the irrationality at the core of his thoughts and actions.

### **The Delusion of the Heartbeat and Guilt**

One of the most powerful manifestations of the narrator's irrationality comes when he begins to hear the old man's heartbeat after committing the murder. The sound grows louder and louder in his mind until it becomes unbearable and the same idea can be brought again. He describes:

*"It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! —no, no! They heard! —they suspected! —they knew! —they were making a mockery of my horror! —this I thought, and this I think."* (Poe, 1843).

At this point, the narrator's sense of rationality completely unravels. The heartbeat that he hears is a product of his guilty conscience, but he believes it is a real sound, which only serves to increase his anxiety and paranoia. The narrator's mind is so overcome by guilt that it distorts reality, causing him to hallucinate the beating heart. This auditory hallucination represents his inability to suppress the overwhelming emotions and guilt he has repressed for so long.

The fact that the narrator thinks the police officers are mocking him, even though they remain unaware of his crime, further illustrates his irrationality. His mind has turned against him, and he is now unable to distinguish between reality and his own distorted perceptions. The irrationality of his thoughts becomes so intense that it drives him to confess his crime in a fit of panic, believing that the officers can hear the heartbeat as well.

### **The Collapse of Rationality and the Final Confession**

The final irrational act in the story is the narrator's confession to the murder. His growing obsession with the heartbeat, combined with his overwhelming guilt, causes him to lose control of his mind. In a moment of extreme anxiety, he can no longer contain his irrational belief that the sound of the heart is audible to everyone around him. Unable to bear the mental strain any longer, he shouts, *"I am a madman! I admit it! I killed the old man! I tell you; I killed him!"* (Poe, 1843). This outburst represents the total collapse of the narrator's rationality. His attempt to convince the reader—and himself—that he is sane throughout the story is shattered. The irrationality of his behavior and his inability to cope with the guilt of his actions leads him to a breakdown, culminating in his confession.

## Conclusion

In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Edgar Allan Poe creates a narrator who is caught between rationality and irrationality, leading to his eventual downfall. The narrator's insistence on his sanity, despite committing murder based on an obsession with the old man's eye, illustrates the complex interplay between logic and madness. His calculated actions reveal a mind that is capable of rational thought, but his irrational motivations and the eventual collapse of his rationality under the weight of guilt point to a deeper psychological disorder.

The irrationality of the narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is revealed through his obsession with the old man's eye, his delusional justifications for murder, and his eventual breakdown under the weight of guilt. Despite his insistence on being rational, his thoughts and actions are deeply irrational, driven by obsession, guilt, and distorted perceptions. Ultimately, the narrator's inability to separate his delusions from reality leads to his downfall, serving as a powerful exploration of the fragility of the human mind.

## Implication

It has generated the awareness to all that we need to be conscious regarding the human mind because it does not become certain when it turns out to be irrational from the rational condition and leads to the act of the crime as the narrator has done in the story.

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