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The Sound of Guilt: Psychoanalytic Themes in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*

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Abstract

The Tell Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe is a famous story that looks into the mind of its narrator. It explores feelings of guilt, obsession, and madness. This paper looks at the story using ideas from psychology, especially those created by Sigmund Freud. It talks about basic parts of the mind like the id, ego, and superego, as well as the idea of repression. This paper examines the narrator's heightened anxiety, his obsession with the old man's eye, and the intense guilt that leads him to confess. It shows that Freud's ideas about the mind help us understand the hidden forces that influence the narrator's behavior. The paper says that the old man's heartbeat sounds represent the guilt the narrator has been hiding. This guilt causes the narrator to lose their mental stability. Looking at Poe's story this way shows that it's more than just a murder tale. It deeply explores how our minds work and the unavoidable effects of hidden desires and breaking moral rules.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud, repression, guilt, subconscious mind

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) is an important piece of spooky writing. It is well known for looking at how people think and feel, especially the mental struggles of the story's main character, who isn't named. The story is about a man who goes crazy because he becomes obsessed with an old man's scary eye. His madness leads him to kill the old man. Poe's story gives a lot to look at when studying psychology. It shows hidden thoughts, unspoken wishes, and feelings of guilt. According to Sigmund Freud's ideas about the mind (Torres et al., 2024), *The Tell-Tale Heart* is not just a story about murder. It also looks deep into the complexities of how people think. The narrator struggles with hidden desires and the rules of society, which is revealed in the story (Kharal et al., 2024).

Psychoanalysis, created by Sigmund Freud in the late 1800s, says that people's



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actions are mostly shaped by feelings and thoughts they aren't aware of, like wishes, fears, and memories they try to forget. Freud's theory says that the mind has three main parts: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. The *id* is about basic drives and wants, usually linked to feelings of pleasure and aggression. It works on the idea of seeking pleasure (Kharal et al., 2024). *Ego* deals with what is real and helps balance the desires of the *id* with what is expected from the outside world. *The superego* represents the values and rules we learn from society. It often makes us feel guilty or anxious when our basic desires go against what we know is right. A key idea in psychoanalysis is repression. This indicates that we instinctively distance ourselves from distressing memories, emotions, or impulses that our mind perceives as unacceptable (Dahy et al., 2024).

In Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *psychoanalytic theory* helps us understand the narrator's mental issues and personal struggles. The story focuses on feelings of guilt, obsession, and how the narrator's mind falls apart. We can better understand this by using Freud's ideas about repression and his concepts of the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*.

Repression is very important in the psychological aspects of *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The narrator says he is not crazy and believes that his strong senses, especially his sharp hearing, show that he is sane. His obsession with the old man's eye, which he calls "the vulture eye," shows a bigger problem in his mind that comes from holding back feelings. The eye, which the narrator finds hard to look at, symbolizes not only the old man's physical trait but also the narrator's hidden fears, insecurities, and anger. The narrator sees the eye as bad, but it probably represents parts of himself that he doesn't want to accept.

Psychoanalytic theory suggests that our unconscious mind holds memories and desires that we try to forget. These often show up in our actions or how we behave in ways that symbolize those hidden feelings. The narrator's fixations on the eye can be seen as a sign of his inner struggle. His choice to kill the old man to get rid of the eye shows his effort to get rid of a part of himself that he doesn't want to face. Freud's idea of projection fits here. The narrator puts his own hidden fears onto the old man, thinking that the old man's eye is what makes him anxious. Murder is not just a violent act; it is an unconscious way of trying to get rid of something that represents his inner struggles (Kholifah, 2024).

Freud's idea about the mind helps us understand how the narrator feels in *The Tell Tale Heart*. The *id*, which stands for basic wants and feelings, is shown in the narrator's strong desire to kill the old man. The murder shows the narrator's hidden feelings, like the need for anger, power, and control. The narrator's fixations on the old man's eye show that he struggles to deal with his bad feelings while still wanting to be good.

The *ego*, tasked with mediating between the *id*'s impulses and reality, influences the narrator's rationalizations. He repeatedly asserts his sanity, claiming meticulous planning and logical behavior to justify his actions. However, his obsessive focus on the eye and irrational behavior exposes a fragile and overburdened *ego*. Freud posited that when the *ego* fails to balance the demands of the *id* and the moral constraints of the *superego*, psychological instability arises. In the narrator's case, this imbalance leads to an eventual collapse, culminating in his confession. His admission is not merely a moment of guilt but a profound indication of a fractured self, overwhelmed by repressed emotions



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and unresolved conflicts.

Literature Review

The ideas of feeling guilty and going crazy have been examined a lot in psychology and books, especially by those who study the mind.

Guilt is a confused feeling that makes you feel sorry, blame yourself, and want to fix something. It happens when people feel that they have violated moral or ethical rules (Baumeister et al. 1994). Guilt can be helpful because it makes us think about what we do and helps us become better people. But if we feel guilty a lot or cannot get over it, it can hurt our mental health and lead to issues like worry, sadness, and dangerous actions. Knowing how different feelings work together is important to understand how guilt and madness influence one another. Higgins and some other people. In 1986, it was noted that people often feel guilty when they are anxious about possible outcomes or when they fail to meet their goals. This gives us a different way to think about guilt.

Madness, according to Szasz (2017), includes various feelings and behaviors such as anger, aggression, frustration, and issues with dealing with other people. It often comes from issues in a person's thoughts that haven't been handled, like feelings of guilt. Books often show how feelings of guilt can lead to madness, and these emotions usually have a big impact on the story. In Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the main character goes crazy because he becomes obsessed with something. This obsession leads him to commit murder, and later, he breaks down mentally because he feels guilty.

Many experts have studied Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Tell-Tale Heart* because it talks a lot about guilt and madness. Kaur and Puri (2023) study how a storyteller's feelings can change the story, while Alshafi (2019) uses story analysis to explain how this impacts language teaching. In 2022, Stinson and others did a study about how self-esteem, excitement, and feelings of guilt appear in a story. In 2023, another study looked at how people feel afraid about the environment and how good they are at noticing their own body feelings. Amir (2017) gives a summary of the short story and highlights its main themes. These studies examine *The Tell-Tale Heart* in different ways, helping us understand the story's mental themes better.

Freud's ideas about the mind help us understand feelings of guilt and confusion. The mind has three parts: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. The *id* is about our basic wants. It makes us want to get what we need right now without thinking about the future (Freud, 1989). In *The Tell Tale Heart*, the narrator feels so strongly about the old man's eye that it makes him hate it and drives him to kill the old man. The *ego* helps us manage our deep desires and what is realistic and okay in the world around us. It attempts to manage our desires so we behave in ways that are acceptable to others. The storyteller finds it difficult to stay normal while trying to hide what he did wrong. This shows Freud's idea that the *ego* needs to handle tough situations.

The *superego* helps us know what is right and wrong according to society's rules. It's really important for how we feel guilty (Freud, 1931). The narrator feels bad because of his conscience, which makes him hear the heartbeat of the victim. This shows the fight he feels inside. Feeling too much guilt can make someone harm themselves and lose control, just like the narrator does during a mental breakdown (Hossain, 2017). Freud's theory helps us understand the narrator's



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personal problems and how the different parts of the mind—the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*—create an imbalance that affects the story.

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes psychoanalytic theory to explore the themes of guilt and the unconscious in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Drawing from Lois Tyson's *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reappraisal* and Andrew Berry's *Psychological Perspectives on Literature*, this framework engages with Freudian concepts of the unconscious, repression, and the dynamics between the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* to analyze the psychological state of the narrator.

According to Tyson (2015), psychoanalytic criticism posits that human behavior is governed by unconscious forces, often manifested through repressed desires, guilt, and neuroses. The narrator's obsession with the old man's eye and his eventual confession are symptomatic of unconscious guilt, a central aspect of psychoanalytic theory. The story is examined through Freudian lenses, particularly focusing on repression (Tyson, 2015), where the narrator attempts to suppress his feelings of guilt, which ultimately resurface in the form of auditory hallucinations, symbolizing the unconscious mind's insistence on moral reckoning.

Berry (2002) supports this view, emphasizing the tension between the *id*'s primal urges and the *superego*'s moral imperatives. The dynamics of the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* are critical in understanding the narrator's psychological deterioration as he struggles with the moral consequences of his actions. The heartbeat, representing his suppressed guilt, becomes a manifestation of the *superego*, which exerts moral pressure on the narrator, ultimately leading to his unraveling. By applying these psychoanalytic concepts, this paper aims to explore how Poe's story illustrates the profound psychological effects of guilt and repression, demonstrating the complex relationship between the unconscious and conscious mind.

Research Methodology

This study employs textual analysis and close reading as its primary methodologies to examine Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Textual analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of the narrative structure, language, and symbolism in the story, with a specific focus on the psychological dimensions of guilt and madness. Close reading is used to identify and interpret key passages that reveal the inner workings of the narrator's mind, particularly through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Concepts such as the *id*, *ego*, *superego*, and repression guide the analysis, enabling a deeper understanding of how the narrator's actions and obsessions reflect unconscious desires and internal conflicts. By integrating psychoanalytic theory with textual evidence, this methodology highlights the interplay between narrative elements and psychological themes, demonstrating how Poe's work serves as a case study in the complexities of human emotion and mental instability.

Research Questions

1. How do the conscious and unconscious desires of the narrator influence their actions?



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2. How does the narrator's anxiety evolve into guilt?

Textual Analysis

Symbolism and Guilt in *The Tell-Tale Heart*

In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, guilt plays a significant role in shaping the character's emotions and thoughts. In simple words, guilt happens when our sense of right and wrong (superego) clashes with what we really want (id). The narrator feels really guilty, and this is shown through his dream of hearing the old man's heartbeat. This leads him to confess. The heartbeat, getting louder and more urgent, shows how unavoidable guilt can be. Even though he tries to hide his crime and stay in control, the narrator can't escape the feelings that come from what he did.

"It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage... It was a sound like the sound of a watch that is enveloped in cotton. I thought the sound would be heard by a neighbor."

Freud's idea about repressed feelings shows how the narrator's guilt comes back as the sound of the heartbeat. In the story, the narrator keeps saying that he acted logically and that his actions are right. However, the guilt he is hiding becomes too much for him to handle. Hearing a heartbeat that isn't really there shows the guilt the narrator is feeling, which they can't control or forget anymore. The sound shows the narrator's struggle inside. It represents both the life he has ended and the guilt he feels about what he did.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* is an interesting look at the complicated thoughts and feelings people have, especially our hidden feelings and how guilt can show itself. Using ideas from psychoanalytic theory, the story shows the narrator's mental conflicts between basic desires (id), the balancing role of the ego, and the moral rules set by the superego. The narrator's focus on the old man's eye, his hidden feelings of guilt, and his final collapse shows the mental struggle that is central to the story. Using Freud's ideas about repression, the id, the ego, and the superego, *The Tell-Tale Heart* is more than just a story about murder; it deeply explores what it means to be human and shows how we can't escape feelings of guilt.

Repression and the Unconscious Mind

The main reason for what the narrator does in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is hiding their feelings. The narrator says he is not crazy and actually believes his strong senses, especially his excellent hearing, show that he is sane. His obsession with hearing the old man's heart shows his hidden guilt and anxiety. His need to be logical, even though his actions are not, shows that he is struggling inside. This can be seen as the mind's effort to manage and hold back the basic urges of the id, which include his violent thoughts.

"True! - Nervous—I had been and am very, very dreadfully nervous; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them."

The narrator's obsession with the old man's eye, which he calls "the vulture eye," shows that he has hidden feelings. The eye shows the narrator's own feelings of insecurity and dislike for himself, which he puts onto the old man. In simple words, the eye represents the narrator's hidden fears and the parts of his mind



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that he struggles to face. His fixation on getting rid of the eye is his final attempt to remove a part of himself that he doesn't want and can't manage.

The Id, Ego, and Superego in the Narrator's Mind

Freud's ideas about the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* can also be seen in how the narrator thinks and acts. The *id*, which is all about basic instincts and desires, is shown in the narrator's strong need to kill the old man. "***I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye with a film over it... and thus rid myself of the eye forever***". According to Freud, the violent action is a way for the narrator to let out the hidden, unconscious desires he finds hard to manage. The narrator doesn't realize that his actions are driven by hidden feelings. Instead, he tries to explain them in a logical way.

The *superego* holds the person's learned sense of right and wrong and the rules of society, and it is where the narrator feels their guilt. After he killed the old man, he starts to hear what he thinks is the old man's heart pounding under the floor.

"It was the beating of the old man's heart....and I grew furious as I heard it."

This sound he hears represents the critical voice inside him, making him face the truth about what he did wrong. "*Villains!*" *I shrieked, "Dissemble no more! I admit the deed! ... It is the beating of his hideous heart!"* His inability to stop hearing the heartbeat shows how strong guilt can be. Freud would say this happens when a person's mind can't balance their basic desires with what they know is right.

Symbolism and the Role of Guilt

Guilt is very important in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and we can understand how it affects the story by looking at it through the ideas of psychology. The narrator feels very guilty, which shows the strongest when he hears the old man's heart beating after he has killed him. Even though he hid the body, he can't escape the mental effects of what he did. The heartbeat gets louder and stronger, showing that the narrator can't hide his feelings of guilt. Freud's idea about repressed feelings shows how the narrator's guilt comes back as strange sounds or voices. The heartbeat reminds us that we can't completely ignore our feelings, and any emotions we try to push away will always come back.

The idea of a heartbeat suggests deeper feelings related to life and desire, which keep going even though the narrator tries to get rid of them. The heartbeat represents the narrator's hidden sexual or angry feelings, which he believes are connected to the violence of the murder. As the heartbeat gets louder, it shows the increasing pressure of hidden feelings, leading to the narrator's breakdown and confession.

The Split Self: Identity and Madness

A key theme in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is the duality of the narrator's personality. This can be looked at through the idea of dissociation in psychology. The narrator shows signs of a troubled mind because he acts like a logical person but also does something crazy. He tries hard to separate himself from the crime, and his intense focus on the small details of the murder shows that there's a divide between what he knows and feels on the surface and the hidden feelings and



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thoughts that make him act in darker ways.

Poe shows how the narrator slowly loses touch with their own identity. As the narrator gets more fixated on the sound of the heart, he loses his sense of who he is and gives in to the strong feelings from his unconscious mind. The narrator's last confession seems like he can't help but go back to what he has been trying to hide. His guilt pushes him to finally talk about it. This explanation shows that when feelings or thoughts are pushed away, they can't be completely controlled and will eventually show up in our thoughts.

Conclusion

The Tell Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe looks at what happens in the mind, especially feelings of guilt and things we hide from ourselves. Using psychoanalytic theory, we can understand the narrator's slide into madness as a struggle between three parts of his mind: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. His feelings of guilt become a strong force that he cannot control. Poe's detailed description of the narrator's breakdown offers a deep look into the complicated nature of the human mind, making *The Tell Tale Heart* an important story for studying psychology. Using these ideas, we can see how Poe's story shows the weakness of the mind and the unavoidable feeling of guilt, which eventually causes the narrator to destroy himself.

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