

Edgar Allan Poe's Terror of the Relationship: "Madness" in "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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Introduction

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe states that his central concern about producing a literary work lies in an "effect." Rejecting "the usual mode of constructing a story" that stresses the importance of the content, Poe draws attention to the work's influence on the reader:

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view – for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest – I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable of effects, or impression, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" (*Essays and Reviews* 13; emphasis original)

The claim of a predetermined effect is firmly based on Poe's consciousness of the reader's reaction. The idea of *selecting* an effect implies that the author assumes an established standard of reactions on the reader's side.¹ The casually remarked importance of originality for the work is further discussed in Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* and suggests the contemporary concern of the relationship between literature and the public. The review was first published in April and May 1842 and then a longer version appeared in 1847. The May 1842 review commends Hawthorne for his "originality" of not only the work's subject matter but also its "tone." The 1847 review discusses the matter more closely and we can see Poe's idea of the relationship between originality and popularity. This longer review neutralizes Poe's admiration of Hawthorne in that the latter writer does not succeed in gaining popularity. The failure is attributed to the way of showing novelty. For Poe, novel matters are not enough for the work to be original. He states that

"the novelty of effect . . . is best wrought, for the end of all fictitious composition, pleasure, by shunning rather than by seeking the absolute novelty of combination" (*Essays and Reviews* 580). Since Poe admires "originality," "shunning . . . the absolute novelty" may sound paradoxical. Yet the tact of avoiding absolute novelty is related to the situation that the literary market includes "the lighter literature" that is supported by "the masses . . . seeking in this literature amusement" (580). The following passage clarifies Poe's aim for alienation from and sympathy with such mass readers at once:

. . . the true originality,—true in respect of its purposes—is that which, in bringing out the half-formed, the reluctant, or the unexpressed fancies of mankind, or in exciting the more delicate pulses of the heart's passion, or in giving birth to some universal sentiment or instinct in embryo, thus combines with the pleasurable effect of *apparent* novelty, a real egoistic delight. (580-81; emphasis original)

According to Poe, "the absolute novelty" can alienate the reader, so that the work has to show its novelty as novel and at the same time has to enable the reader to find the novelty *understandable*. His "originality" thus attempts to fuse the novel and the commonplace that would make the reader at once alienated and sympathetic in order to achieve the effect intended. Such idea of creation reflects the situation of the literary market in nineteenth-century America.

The literary market in nineteenth-century America saw the appearance of the mass readers, partly because of the industrial revolution that enabled literary works to circulate more easily and cheaply with developed transportation and publishing equipment. The early days of the mass consumption of literary works required contemporary writers to struggle in the dilemma between the market trend and their own aestheticism. The relationship between writers and popular culture was examined in the 1980s by such critics as David S. Reynolds that focused on the relationship between sensational literature and so-called canonical works in American literature. As Reynolds notes, Poe shared with his contemporaries anxiety about popularity of "lighter literature" and the power of "the masses." Poe, working as a writer and a professional editor of magazines, held an ambivalent feeling toward the mass readers. As a writer, he aspires to embody his own aestheticism in works, while as an editor he needs to make them cater to the readers. The popularity of

“lighter literature” thus caused a professional dilemma for Poe. The conflict between the public taste and his own aestheticism led him to create certain literary works that contain “enthusiastic absorption and studied redirection of the sensational” (Reynolds 226) that would meet demands on both sides.

The interest in the relationship between Poe’s works and contemporary reading recently resulted in Richard Kopley’s *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries*, a work which identifies minute sources of each tale featuring C. Auguste Dupin, a detective figure appearing in Poe’s ratiocinative trilogy. Kopley’s work is significant in clarifying that Poe’s ratiocinative tales are composed of various sensational stories which appeared in the contemporary newspapers. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” to cite an instance, implies allusions to as many as five articles appeared in *The Philadelphia Saturday News and Lady Gazette*. Stating that “reliance on newspapers for the writing of fiction has long been a respectable practice among American writers,” Kopley explains the tale’s importance as Poe’s ability of giving articles “[a] unity of effect” (41). If Kopley’s work focuses on Poe’s three ratiocinative tales, it offers a possibility of reading other tales in terms of the interaction between the popular readings and “canonical” literature. Poe then appears as different from his contemporaries, due to his deliberate attempt to drawing the reader’s attention by utilizing what had been excluded from canons of literature. Poe himself briefly points out the enthusiasm to obtain attention: “To be appreciated you must be *read*, and these things [of bad taste] are invariably sought after with avidity” (*Letters* 1: 58). It is this paramount concern with the mass readers that enables Poe to produce his miscellaneous tales.

As Kopley clarifies, such periodicals as newspapers provided resources with the writers, since newsworthy articles are ideal materials to attract the public attention. Poe’s days saw arising interest in “sensational fiction” that fuses literary creation with journalism. Shelley Streeby, in discussing “the culture of sensation” that began spreading in the 1840s, indicates its mixture of matters beyond categories: “the culture of sensation references a wider spectrum of popular arts and practices that includes journalism, music, blackface minstrelsy, and other forms of popular theater . . . and frontier humor as well as sensational melodrama and, in the broadest terms, the political cultures that were alighted with these popular forms” (27). Journalism is also mentioned by Maurizio Ascari, who marks the heyday of sensational literature from the 1860s to the 1870s, arguing that “[t]he development of journalism fostered a first wave of sensationalism, which was indebted to criminal reports and

marked by a morbid interest in catastrophe as well as the nightmarish aspects of modern urban life" (111). Sensational literature, in this way, holds the possibility of fusing the contemporary concern reflected in popular readings with literary creation. It is natural that Poe used sensational materials to compose his tales in order to attract the readers' attention. Yet Poe's sensational work is not a product of his concession to "lighter literature." On the contrary, it was produced from the fusion of the "lighter literature" with his literary principles. I will hereafter consider how Poe's interest in catering to the contemporary "commercial" demand is related to his literary creation.

The following argument mainly focuses on Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), in order to search for a possibility of reading the tale in terms of contemporary concerns. The tale's criticisms tend to reach a symbolical interpretation and the tale seems to draw less attention that concerns the contemporary situation of literature, partly because of the hallucinatory descriptions and the narrator's madness that can seemingly explain everything that happens in the tale. Yet it is significant to pay attention to the situation when the tale was written. As Michael Allen points out and Jonathan Auerbach agrees, "around 1839 Poe began simplifying his ornate prose style in an attempt to appeal to a mass readership" (Auerbach 53). Allen clarifies that Poe was changing his attitude toward the tradition of British magazines around the beginning of the 1840s, stating that "the favourable attitudes" toward British magazines "are all to be found in the work before 1842" (155). It is quite likely that Poe became more critical about British influence on American literature, and more conscious about the readers surrounding him, when "The Tell-Tale Heart" was written. It is the representation of "madness" that I would like to examine in this argument as the result of Poe's ambiguity toward the contemporary demand. The "madness" described by Poe, reflecting the contemporary cultural matters, inscribes in the work the author's ambiguous attitude toward desire for the readers.

1. Proximity between "Madness" and the Reader

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is made of a confession by murderer, who kills the old man that he lives with. The theme of murder confession reflects several cases that actually happened in Poe's days, as pointed out by several critics. Thomas Olive Mabbott introduces a real murder case, which occurred in 1830. The case was caused by John Francis Knapp, who employed a man to kill and rob

Joseph White of Salem. The case introduced Knopf, the conspirator of murder, as an “ordinary” man. Daniel Webster, a special prosecutor of the case, warns artists that from now on murderers need to be “not so much an example of human nature in its depravity, and in its paroxysm of crime, as an infernal being, a fiend, in the ordinary display and development of his character” (qtd. in Poe, *Tales and Sketches* 790). The conspirator’s “self-possession and steadiness” offers a new idea of a criminal who does not stand out from the “ordinary,” an image of a criminal as fused into the mass population. Such implication of ubiquitous murderers leads to the interest in psychology that would help to find a way to define the “normal.” Another source of a real murder case is also pointed out by Reynolds as “the Robinson case” that drew attention to the mob’s great interest in a violent scene. Peter Robinson’s murder was utterly cruel in itself. Yet it is notable that his execution was accompanied by the frenzy of the audience, who rushed to see him hung and tore up the hanging rope for a souvenir. Reynolds writes, “the Robinson case had been a primary instance of the American public’s fascination with repulsive crime and with execution of criminals” (232). “The Tell-Tale Heart” possesses several similarities to these actual cases, but central factors important for the tale’s theme can be extracted as a psychological approach to a murderer and an effect intended to attract the reader’s attention.

Yet “The Tell-Tale Heart” does not follow the real cases so closely as to reproduce realistic stories. Instead, it differs from such non-fictional stories by removing detailed background information, including the connection between the murderer and the victim, the convincing motive of murder, or the following fate of the murder-confessor. Identifying the tale’s sources is important in that “The Tell-Tale Heart” is written on the basis of the contemporary popular articles, but its content does not reproduce what is expected in the non-fictional narratives. According to Reynolds, “The Tell-Tale Heart” avoids either “moral ambiguities” of the Knapp case or “grisly sensationalism” of the Robinson case: “But he [Poe] avoids repulsive accounts of violence or blood, shifting his attention to the crazed mind of the obsessed narrator” (233). The lack of details that would stimulate reader’s emotion differentiates Poe’s fiction from real murder narratives. This seeming paradox of seeking and avoiding public popularity needs to be examined, so that we can establish a connection between Poe’s aesthetic belief and his commercial concern.

One of the important aesthetic beliefs concerning the relationship between the work and the reader is found in Poe’s essay on *Robinson Crusoe*. Daniel

Defoe, though lived in different time and space, must have seen a similar situation with that of Poe. According to Ian Watt, the eighteenth-century literary market in England also saw a growing "commercial" aspect of writing because of the strengthened authority of booksellers as medium between the reader and the writer (52). Probably being aware of their similar situation which requires writers to write in the growing market, Poe insists that Robinson Crusoe's great popularity does not appraise the author's ability fairly. While admiring the great popularity on the one hand, he writes, "Men do not look upon it [*Robinson Crusoe*] in the light of a literary performance" (*Essays and Reviews* 201). The negligence is attributed to "the portent magic of verisimilitude" and Poe writes, "Indeed the author of Crusoe must have possessed, above all other faculties, what has been termed the faculty of *identification*—that dominion exercised by volition over imagination which enables the mind to lose its own, in a fictitious, individuality. This includes, in a very great degree the power of abstraction" (202; emphasis original). Poe further discusses in the review that Robinson Crusoe enjoys the great popularity, since the work's subject, "[t]he idea of man in a state of perfect isolation," crosses one's mind so frequently that readers are likely to feel sympathies with the idea's embodiment (*Essays and Reviews* 202). Daniel Defoe's popularity, in Poe's opinions, comes from the writer's selection of fit theme that would place the work in proximity to the reader's mind. Therefore, it is suggested that the proximity between the work and the reader serves as a test of its success in the literary market.

The abstraction of the reader's individuality and embodiment of general idea lurking in each person's mind are thus aimed at by Poe in his tale. Yet it is necessary to take notice of the difference between Poe's approach to his tale and that of the eighteenth-century novelist. Defoe's approach to "verisimilitude" makes one of the characteristics in contemporary realistic novels of England. As Watt explains, the verisimilitude marks the rise of the novel, since "the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experience of individuals" enabled several literary works to differentiate themselves from traditional works that featured universal plots (27). It is the particularity of individual experience that enabled Defoe's works to offer verisimilitude to the reader and to obtain popularity that Poe admired. The nineteenth-century writer, however, did not find minute description of individual experience effective for achieving his aim.

Although Poe connected the popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* with sympathetic

reading of the work, he himself does not provide "The Tell-Tale Heart" with particular description of the murder case. The absence of particularity, however, does not imply that Poe's work regresses to the medieval tendency of universal plots, which Defoe and his contemporary realistic novelists had differentiated themselves from. Poe in his review was aware of the importance of identification between the reader and the work, and nevertheless he deprived his characters of individuality. The detached attitude toward realistic description can reflect a doubt as to the idea that "an authentic account of the actual experience of individuals" is possible in the novel. The doubt is not clearly expressed by Poe, but the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" embodies such a doubt by featuring his "insanity." The seemingly insane narration, along with the lack of particulars, can present itself detached from the reader. Reynolds concludes his interpretation of "The Tell-Tale Heart" by denying readers' sympathy with the confessing criminal, or "the psychopath" (233). It is true that readers would rarely disagree that the narrator is deranged, but the insanity of the narrator is not enough to decide whether readers can be sympathetic with the narrator or not. It is rather necessary to examine the effect itself brought about through the "insane" narrative. Most readers surely agree that the narrator is "mad," but it does not mean he is alienated from the readers. I would rather argue that the absence of the tale's realistic accounts proactively exploits the "mad" confession of murder case in order to appeal to as many readers as possible. In other words, "The Tell-Tale Heart" can be a tale that gives proximity between the reader and "madness" embodied as the narrator.² The proximity is important in terms of representation of "madness," since it enables the tale to foreground arbitrary definition of the "mad."

Poe is notorious for his morbid and deranged narrators, but the author's attitude toward "madness" can be detached and ambiguous, as the reader can perceive in several tales. A good example can be found in "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" (1844). The tale is about a mental institution, in which patients riot against their superintendents, confine them in the cells and pretend to be the staff welcoming the narrator. The narrator, visiting the institution for the first time, does not notice the reversal till at the end superintendents break into the dining hall and cause great disorder. The tale reveals an ambiguity of the boundary between sanity and insanity and the violent result of excluding one side. Poe's interest in validity of defining the two sides is highlighted by the tale's comical narrator. The naivety of the narrator who does not notice the institution's abnormality is mainly caused by his

dependence on the already established boundary. Although the narrator refers to a possibility of his talking with "lunatics" pretending to be the staff, he abates his anxiety by admitting that strangeness can be more or less seen in every person. He states, for example, "but then the world is made up of all kinds of people, with all modes of thought, and all thoughts of conventional customs" (*Tales and Sketches* 1009) or "There is no knowing what one eats" (1011). The generalization of peculiarity depends on the narrator's uncritical mind that does not doubt the institution's assumed system. The more the narrator tries to believe in the readymade boundary between in and out of the cells, the more he blurs the division between the sane and the insane. The narrator might contribute to removing the ambiguous boundary between sane and insane, though his innocent behavior does not prove valid for the problems of mental illness and the institution. The tale caricatures the arbitrary dichotomy as well as the danger of naivety that simply tries to remove the boundary.

Poe thus depicts that the definition of "madness" is relative. The boundary between sanity and insanity depends on the viewpoint of those who objectify "mad" people. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the objectification is denied to some extent. The tale is written as a murderer's confession, and its radical difference from murder narratives of real cases helps the "psychopath" to be released from the relatively defined values. The difference partly lies in the already mentioned fact that no specific information about the background is given in the tale. The reader never knows the relationship between the murderer and the victim, or their life in the past that would imply some underlying motive of the murder. The absence of concrete information defines Poe's tale different from the murder narrative of real cases that appealed the contemporary mass.

In a real murder case, the audience desires to find as many pieces of information as possible. Karen Halttunen follows the process in which judgment of murder case is taken over from the religion to the law in the late eighteenth-century. She writes, "Before the mid-eighteenth century, the Anglo-American criminal trial was not adversarial. It worked as an inquisitorial procedure conducted by a judge whose job was to ferret out God's truth, considered to be single and uncontestable" (Halttunen 93). The religious trial was taken over by the legal agency, and the turn made a murder narrative mysterious due to the lack of authoritative judgment by God. Such turn introduced those who "construct" a consistent narrative for the crime scene:

Criminal trials are organized around storytelling, the construction of clear, “common-sense” narratives which assist jurors in their arrangement of time frames, characters, motives, means, and settings—stories which cut through the confusions generated by trial testimony to achieve narrative clarity. (Halttunen 101)

Since the court is a system in which adversarial stories of defendants and prosecutors try to overpower each other, it is up to those who witness the trial to construct the ultimate narrative. Without background information, the audience cannot find a clue to construct their own story for the case. “The Tell-Tale Heart” lacks concrete information that would be in reality used for selecting a consistent narrative from competitive plots proposed in the court. Readers are unable to interpret the tale by giving a plausible explanation, unlike those who can gather information through mass media to convince themselves of a certain story.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” thus keeps the narration from being interfered with readers’ own story. The interpretation which regards the narrator as “mad” is likely to originate from the inability to give consistency to the narration. The tale represents “madness” as what cannot be understood or interpreted. By refusing readers’ interference, the tale represents “madness” without allowing the readers to hold an objective viewpoint. As Halttunen notes, the legal system does not reveal all the matters concerning a crime case. Rather, “the lawyers could not fully close the gaps that opened up in their circumstantial narratives of criminal guilt” (Halttunen 196). The audience’s role is to fill the gaps in behalf of the lawyers with their imaginary stories, and in the process, the audience notices “mysteries” that are beyond their understanding, such as an absence of any murder motive.³ “The Tell-Tale Heart” prevents readers from constructing a narrative with background information and represents “madness” that is impossible to be interpreted or explained as an object.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” represents “madness” that would refuse to serve as an object of the reader. The refusal differentiates the tale from the sensational fiction that only aims to drawing the reader’s attention. Poe thus, replacing Defoe’s particular description with the lack of particulars, represents the “mad” narrator that is free from an arbitrary relationship with the reader. Yet such representation of madness inscribes Poe’s concern in obtaining the reader, which can be seen in the narrator’s desire. The obsession of the narrator needs to be considered in order to identify his desire in the tale that may reflect that

of the author.

2. Confession without Confessor and Confessant

The most conspicuously “mad” scene in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the climax scene when the narrator believes that he hears the victim’s heartbeat, and ends up frantically confessing his crime. Chatting with investigators who visited the house because the victim’s shriek was heard by neighbors, the confessor inevitably reveals his crime. What drives the narrator to the violent emotion is his obsession with *sound*. Although the narrator first succeeds in convincing the investigators of his innocence, sudden ringing begins to haunt him. The sound rejects the narrator’s understanding, making him wonder if it rings outside or inside his mind. His frenzy is heightened when he is convinced that the sound must be ringing outside and the investigators *must* hear it too. Yet the investigators seem indifferent to the sound, so that the narrator doubts if they are deceiving him and at that moment, his violent emotion almost approaches the zenith:

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. (*Tales and Sketches* 797; emphasis original)

The narrator is here harassed by the idea that the investigators may not be trustful listeners. They are either unaware of the sound or, though aware of it, hide that they are aware of it. In either case, they cannot prove their integrity as listeners. At the end, the narrator’s burst of his emotion reflects his desire for those who can receive his narration as he expects. When the narrator howls, “Villains! . . . dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—*here, here!*—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” (*Tales and Sketches* 797; emphasis added), his urge to locate the corpse (“here”) echoes his desire for obtaining listeners (“hear”) that can share the sound he hears. The revelation of his crime thus originates from the narrator’s desire for trustful listeners that would prove the narration’s integrity.

The desire for listeners draws our attention to the fact that the tale implies different listeners. First of all, the tale seems to begin in the middle of the

conversation between the narrator and his companion:

TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? (*Tales and Sketches* 792)

The “you” in this sentence can point to an imaginary companion as well as the reader. In either case, the narrator starts his narration in order to prove that he is not mad. The concern with madness is repeated throughout the tale, each time the narrator claims that he is not mad, emphasizing how “wise” he plans and carry out the murder.⁴ The dichotomy between wise/sane and unwise/insane is unstable, as the author himself makes one character explain in “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether”:

“ . . . [A lunatic’s] cunning, too, is proverbial, and great. If he has a project in view, he conceals his design with a marvelous wisdom; and the dexterity with which he counterfeits sanity, presents, to the metaphysician, one of the most singular problems in the study of mind. When a madman appears *thoroughly* sane, indeed, it is high time to put him in a straight jacket.” (*Tales and Sketches* 1018; emphasis original)

The conflicting idea of relationship between insanity and wisdom denies clear dichotomy claimed by the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The repeated denial of his “madness” gives a consistent theme to the narration, and the obsession paradoxically emphasizes the narrator’s appearance as a “mad” character.

The purpose of the narration, however, changes after committing the crime. The narrator receives investigators and the last part of the tale is allotted for his struggle to identify the haunting sound, as we have seen above. The narrator no longer tries to prove his sanity, and the “you” appearing in the beginning of the tale vanishes. The concern about the sound replaces the narrator’s claim for his sanity with his desire for the proof that he has reliable narratees. Throughout the tale, there is no listener that would listen to the narrator consistently. Without such a consistent listener, what the narrator says cannot be received by anyone. The narrator’s demands both for his sanity and his narratees rather lead to a skeptical view of the narration’s validity.

The skepticism about the narration results from the tale’s construction that lacks dialectic relationship between the narrator and the narratee. The assumed listeners of the narration, “you” and the investigators, share an

inability to interfere with the narration and neither can form interdependence that is expected to be accompanied to confession in a practical situation. Peter Brooks, in *Troubling Confessions*, examines a confession as a cultural phenomenon from religious, legal, psychoanalytic, and literary aspects. As he notes, these discourses "appear to share an understanding that the bond of confessant and confessor often is crucial to the production of confession" (Brooks 35). Confessions can function in reality with an aid of those who listen to the confession and decide its meaning.

In legal cases, for example, it is judges that determine the criminal's fate taking into consideration his or her confessions that are expected to be given voluntarily. Yet there is no such situation that can free the criminal completely from the external pressures, so that "confessions are rarely products of a free and rational will" (Brooks 63). The judge's role is to provide such ambiguous confessions with legal meaning through judgment. Psychoanalytic confessions also require those who interpret them, that is, doctors who try to find out a therapeutic solution to their patients' mental problems. This kind of confession largely depends on the doctor's interpreting what the patient speaks and constructing a therapeutic story. Sigmund Freud states that, in psychoanalytic confessions, the doctor's authority would not be damaged even if one construction fails to reach an immediate solution (261). The truth in such confessions can be brought up the moment when the therapy finishes. The symptomatic therapy attaches great importance to the doctor's authority to make the confession therapeutic *ex post facto*. Both in legal cases and psychoanalysis, it is confessors that give definition of "true" or "false" to the confession.⁵

Brooks examines confessions in a broad context to reveal the shared importance of recipients of the confession in each field. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narratees, "you" and the investigators, are deprived of any opportunity to define the confession as "true" or "false." The narrator does not seem to converse with "you" except the beginning, and the investigators do not appear after the narrator's fatal confession as the tale ends with the revelation of the murder. The absence of listeners' active function denies the "confession" its interdependence of confessor and confessant.⁶

On the other hand, as legal and psychoanalytic examples suggest, listeners of confession tend to play a role in determining the confessant's fate. The confessant then becomes subordinate to the listener in that the confession is judged from others' interfering viewpoint. That the narration cannot fulfill its

desire for the reliable narratees can point to a possibility that it would not be forcefully objectified through the external values.

The abstraction of “The Tell-Tale Heart” thus leads to the skepticism about the narration’s validity from one angle, and to the denial of objectification of the narrator from another angle. These results of abstracted confession suggest that the tale poses a question as to both subjective and objective viewpoints that are expected in the relationship offered by a “confession.” Michael J. S. Williams, in considering another confessional tale by Poe, “The Imp of the Perverse,” writes “the assumption that there is a clear, direct relationship between subject and voice, a relationship that allows an interpreter to track the subject down to where it lurks behind his words, is shown to be an optimistic fiction” (33). The passage can be also adapted to the case of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” in which the narration does not define the narrator’s integrity either in a subjective or objective way; the narrator’s desire is not allowed to be fulfilled, and he is not vulnerable to his listeners’ interpretation of his confession. The denial of an individual mind behind the confession separates the tale from actual confessional narratives’ basis, which Brooks calls “the modern sensibility” (103). The sensibility is based on “[t]he metaphor of depth,” or “the sense of something behind the surface, needing excavation . . . , discovery, and opening up to the light of examination” (102). The metaphor leads to an idea seen in literary works, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, that an individual can prove its authenticity through its confession. “The Tell-Tale Heart” denies the individual authenticity with the absence of the relationship between confessant and confessor. The vacancy of the relationship is only filled with the text, as it were, only with the superficial appearance of the “confession” on the text.

The “madness” perceived in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is represented through the absence of the relationship between narrator and narratee. Such absence at once denies the narrator subjective and objective interpretations, refusing to be read “in-depth.” The “madness,” above all, refers to the superficial representation of character that lacks an inner depth as well as an external relationship with others. The representation differentiates itself from realistic confessional narratives in that it denies an arbitrary boundary between sane and insane by showing the “psychopath” as a mere construction of language.⁷ The narrator’s desire for the relationship and his failure in obtaining it can be paralleled by readers’ desire for interpreting the narrator and the impossibility of reading his “depth.” The double bind involving readers will be later examined,

after connecting the problem of relationship in the tale to the contemporary issues that involves the author himself.

3. Terror of Visual Relationship

The previous section centers around the confession in "The Tell-Tale Heart," mainly the latter part of the tale. Hereafter the tale's first concern, the murder of an old man, needs to be examined so that we can compare the narrator's fear of the *visual* relationship with a growing interest in visibility in Poe's days.

The murder, as we have seen above, lacks a convincing motive. The narrator denies every imaginable motive stating, "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire" (*Tales and Sketches* 792). Then he reached a motive convincing enough at least for him: "I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it. 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" (792). The statement does not sound rational enough in spite of the narrator's repeated assurance of his "wisdom." Nevertheless, the motive cannot be slighted as merely illogical when we notice that it is not the eye itself but its function to see that drives the narrator to kill the old man. The narrator keeps intruding the old man's room for seven consecutive nights, but each time his attempt is thwarted, because the narrator "found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye" (793). Auerbach writes, "horror for Poe is relational" since in "The Tell-Tale Heart," "only when his master's eye is open, seeing and being seen, does it terrify the first person" (45-46). The horror of the relationship through eyes may not give a rational explanation of the motive, but the cause can be also considered in terms of subjective and objective relationship, this time, between the murderer and the victim.

The relationship between the seer and the seen is metaphorically associated with our demand for the criminal's confession. Brooks, in his argument of confessions in legal scenes, points out that a demand for final confessions reflects "a generalized desire for transparency" (161). Citing examples from Rousseau's *Confessions*, Brooks depicts the desire for transparency as "the ambition to confess entirely, to provide a seamless narrative of the inwardness

as well as the exterior life story of a person” (161). What draws attention is that such “perfect transparency” can cause a problematic idea in a political context. Brooks, mentioning the Reign of Terror in France that “works by denunciation, accusing its enemies of hidden conspiracies and unpatriotic thoughts,” writes, “The tyranny of transparency takes the imperative to confess to a chilling logical conclusion: the abolition of all zones or privacy around the individual, the claim that the individual’s conscience must be legible to all, that there can be no zones of obscurity” (163). The excessive desire for transparency in a political situation reveals a violent aspect of visual relationship that binds two sides, defining each side as those who see the other or as those who are seen by the other. The political implications suggest that dominant power can be obtained by the seer, that is, those who objectify others. For transparency cannot be achieved unless the subjective viewpoint regards the other as “legible.” The narrator’s horror of visual relationship in “The Tell-Tale Heart” can be transferred to the horror of violence seen in the relationship between subject and object of vision.

Violent implications of desire for transparency are found not only in the field of French politics. The concern about visibility is also deeply related to a social phenomenon that affords a foundation of sensational fiction in America. According to Halttunen, mysterious murder narratives that became popular in America in the 1840s “rested on the conviction that the visible city conceals an invisible, even subterranean city of darkly depraved ‘mysteries’” (124). The interest in the invisible is a phenomenon arising in the developing cities, which Halttunen describes as “the growing popular need to imaginatively enter and explore the secret spaces of the new urban world” that had a great influence on nonfictional murder narratives (125). The invisible is what should be found behind the wall by those who desire to see it. The popular concern with visualization of the invisible gives the foundation of sensational murder narratives in real cases, such as a floor plan of the actual spot that reveals the inside of the building.

Such concern of visibility must have exerted influence on the writer, too. Poe himself was interested in contemporary technologies that appeared in and influenced nineteenth-century America. Louis A. Renza, pointing out Poe’s interest in “the visual impact of devices like the diorama, panorama, stereoscopes, phantasmagoria . . . , and especially the daguerreotype” (62), identifies their influence on his tales. The visual innovation is related to a change of the relationship between the public and the private: “many of [Poe’s]

tales register how a socially emergent visual gestalt at once works to define the public realm as such and affects individual perceptions of self and others alike" (Renza 62). New visual technologies, including the daguerreotype that Poe himself used to leave his portrait, connected the private and the public in a new relationship:

It becomes less and less possible to observe not only other persons and events but also one's personal, spatio-temporal experience of them sans their technological reproducibility. Situated alongside an imaginary, internalized public as if capable of visualizing it, even the formerly private fiat of Romantic self-consciousness no longer makes phenomenological sense. (Renza 63)

The "Romantic self-consciousness" is visualized through the technologies including the daguerreotype, but the visualization does not guarantee the individual authenticity. It rather inscribes an illusion of the individual on the surface and objectifies it as the "true" individual for those who see the picture. The daguerreotype can be a symbol of emerging idea of the private that is seen and objectified by the public. The objectification can define individual's inner and external "self," no matter how the individual himself or herself struggles to break such an illusion.

Considering these cultural aspects of visual relationship would help to find a new aspect of the murder in "The Tell-Tale Heart." The murderer kills the old man because of the eye that establishes relationship between them. The contemporary interest in visibility and the power relationship can associate the fear of "Evil Eye" in "The Tell-Tale Heart" with that of arbitrary objectification. The narrator's murder of the old man owing to the eye symbolizes a desire for escaping from being seen and from turning into an object that would be interpreted and defined by others. Yet his attempt to achieve authenticity as a subject is frustrated by the intrusion of the investigators, whose "observations" force the narrator to be an object again. The attempt and its failure point to the reciprocal relationship through vision. Renza writes, "Predicating private experience on the possibility of its reversible public observation, the period's visual ethos ends up haunting voyeurism itself in allowing for the voyeur's own vulnerability to other voyeurs" (63). The circular vulnerability is what the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" experiences in his attempt in vain.

The concern for visual relationship both in the tale and in the contemporary

context, along with the discussion in the previous section, can lead to interpreting the tale's murder and confession as one consistent flow of relational desire. In the first place, the narrator's fear of his opponent's eye reflects his fear of falling into an object through visual relationship. The murder then implies the narrator's attempt to escape from such relational violence. In this way, the confession after the murder can be regarded as an attempt to construct an alternative relationship as a "narrator" with purportedly assumed "listeners." The narrator, however, appears as a textual construct that lacks both inner depth and external relationship with his listeners. The first desire for getting out of the visual bond with the old man is ultimately inhibited by the investigators' observation, while the tale introduces the construction of a superficial individual on the text that thwarts others' desire for interpreting it.

The tale's importance lies in the fact that "madness" depicted in the literary work clarifies a problematic relationship between subject and object. Avoiding representing "madness" as an object or marginalized human nature, "The Tell-Tale Heart" replaces the infinite objectification by visual relationship with "madness," in other words, a literary construct that denies interpretation. The representation of "madness" leads to a possibility of deconstructing the circular relationship between the seer and the seen or the relative boundary between the sane and the insane.

The concern over such power relationship reflects the author's anxiety about the mass readers. "The Tell-Tale Heart" provides obsessive terror of the relationship between the subject and the object, as if Poe's own anxiety about his authenticity as a writer in the repressing literary market is embodied in the narrator.

4. Conclusion: Poe and the Readers

The antipathy toward a suppressing power of those who see the object and define its meaning can be regarded as a reflection of Poe's antipathy toward the power of the mass readers that began dominating the literary market in his days. Auerbach remarks a problematic situation of Poe's creation and considers "how Poe sought to reconcile the contradictory pressures of private and public, that is, how he sought to encode the self in a written form that would allow him to maintain control over his fiction after it was exposed to public scrutiny" (52).⁸ The author is destined to be read through his work and evaluated by anonymous readers. He himself was always aware of the threatening power of

the reader's objectification. James V. Werner assigns the cause of objectification to "disposability" and "topicality" (38) of magazines, noting that Poe's contemporary writers "experienced [the] alienation from the products of their labor in many forms, including the general practice of anonymous or pseudonymous authorship" (40). The relationship between subject and object was an essential concern for Poe's career and "The Tell-Tale Heart" is reflective of his struggle toward obtaining the authenticity as the author amid the commercial relationship with the reader.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" describes violence of the relationship between subject and object, an impossibility of excluding such relationship, and last of all, Poe's literary performance that produces "madness" that cannot be absorbed into the mass. "Madness" in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is an individual's resistance of being interpreted and enclosed by anonymous others. Jonathan Elmer, in discussing "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" offers the possibly clearest construction of sanity in society:

To be sane, it is implied, requires leaving behind the internal world of particularized desires and demons for a world in which everyone is a stranger to everyone else, but where that strangeness does not reveal itself as such. The test of sanity becomes the ability to circulate a self-objectification in accordance with the social norms of anonymity. (144)

The sane falls into "the social norms of anonymity," while the insane has to stand out from the mass. While "madness" in reality is to be marginalized from the viewpoint of the rational discourse, Poe's tale precludes such discourse's sovereign authority.

As mentioned at the end of the previous section, the narrator's desire for the listener and its absence at the same time produces the reader's desire for the reliable narrator and its absence. The reader is to fail in giving a convincing explanation other than that the narrator is "mad," while the representation of the "mad" narrator incessantly recalls terror about the relationship. It reflects the author's anxiety toward his position as a literary subject that creates a work and an object that is to be consumed in the market. "The Tell-Tale Heart" thus makes a node of the concerns inside and outside of the text, that is, concerns of the narrative structure and of the social situation. The tale's inducement to and refusal of the reader's interpretation suggests that Poe was striving to realize his own "literary performance" in the contemporary market of

America, in a different way from Defoe's "identification" with the readers. Representing "madness" as a subject in literary work, "The Tell-Tale Heart" forces the reader to experience the author's anxiety about the lack of individual identity expected in the one-to-one relationship.

Notes

¹ James V. Werner, in his discussion of Poe's conscious remark about the choice of "tone," another important concern of his creation, points out that the tone is, "[r]ather than an integral part of a tale, stemming organically from the content matter, . . . depicted as something external, pre-packaged, that can be grafted onto subject matter to achieve different effects" (48).

² Joseph J. Moldenhauer regards "madness" in such confessional tales as "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" as necessary for attaining Poe's aesthetic desire for "Unity," and points to identification between the reader and "madness." He writes, "The confessor 'infects' the reader with the very torments of mind which beset himself, until confessor and reader are mutually released by the dissolution of identity which concludes the tale" (297).

³ Charles E. May points out the denial of readers' interference with Poe's tale, mentioning metaphoric nature of motive and its importance for the interdependence between "obsession and unity" in the tale: "To understand motive in terms of metaphor—and this indeed is the connection between unity and obsession that Poe contributes to the development of the short story—one cannot refer to a corresponding external reality outside the story. Instead, the reader must determine the identification of the story's unity and the narrator's obsession by analyzing the manifestations of the obsession within the story; that is, those elements that by their very obsessive recurrence distinguish it" (76).

⁴ For example, "Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen how wisely I proceed—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!" (*Tales and Sketches* 792; emphasis original). Similar connection of sanity to being "wise" is repeated twice more (793; 796).

⁵ As Paul de Man writes about Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, judgment of values is indispensable in the confessional act: "To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed, and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie" (279).

⁶ Robert Crossley describes several tales by Poe, including "The Tell-Tale Heart," as "closet monologues," focusing on the lack of proper relationship between the narrator

and the narratee.

⁷ Ronald Bieganowski points out similar characteristics, mentioning "the power language has on the narrator as well as on the reader" in "Ligeia" (176): "the resurrection of Ligeia is a linguistic event, an event re-enacted through the recall of fiction. The writing or telling or reading brings Ligeia to life again" (182).

⁸ As for Poe's consciousness of the reader, Auerbach gives a concise description of the later works' tendency, concluding "Poe turn[ed] his attention directly in his fiction to the problem of an audience" and "although Poe never fully masters his fear of the reader, he eventually manages to put it into perspective by writing stories which treat his fear as an explicit theme" (53).

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