

Edgar Alen Poe: Exploring Human Psychology

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Famous for many firsts in literature, Edgar Allen Poe changed how people write and what readers expected to find on the pages. One crucial way he disrupted writing was by exploring human psychology and providing insight into what motivates us, even when not taken to the extremes his characters experience. Two of his most famous short stories, “The Purloined Letter” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” represent how he avoids the previously common approach of characters not being responsible for their actions or acting without a clear understanding of their motivations. Gone are the gods, “in his nature,” or fate. Instead, Poe explores the complexity of human psychology. In the first story, it is the power of intellect, and in the second, the drive of madness.

In “The Purloined Letter,” Poe presents his final detective story featuring his French investigator, C. Auguste Dupin. Although an unnamed narrator tells the story, Dupin unravels the mystery and exposes the thought process of the perpetrator. The plot is simple and bland — a compromising letter was stolen from a female member of the royal family and kept by the thief as leverage over the royal. The police know the perpetrator, but after an exhaustive search, they have not recovered the letter (“Letter” par. 20).

In their search, the Paris police use every modern scientific method. Poe even

describes how they “examined the rungs of every chair in the hotel, and, indeed the jointings of every description of furniture, by the aid of a most powerful microscope” (“Letter” par. 53). This is science at work, lacking all evaluations of the thoughts and motivations of the blackmailer. This look at only the physical comes up empty. Poe then has Dupin explain to the narrator how he solved the mystery by understanding the culprit's intellect and motivation.

Dupin introduces the importance of understanding brilliance with a tale about a schoolyard game involving marbles. The schoolboy in the story always wins by predicting his opponent's behavior by first understanding their psychology. He takes on their facial expressions and then experiences the emotions that generated the expression (“Letter” par. 94, 96). Dupin uses this same approach to gauge the intellect of the Minister, uncover his motivations, and then deduce where the letter is.

Dupin considers the high intelligence and psychological motivation of the culprit. He reasons the Minister is conflicted by a desire to have power over the royal family and fear of exposure. Dupin then points out the thief's awareness of their superior intellect. 105) Merging these observations, Dupin concludes, “the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagaciousness of not attempting to conceal it at all” (“Letter par. 110).

Going a step further, Poe has Dupin share the assumptions and motivations of the police Prefect as a further example of human psychology. The Prefect assumes that the Minister is not clever “because he has acquired renown as a poet. All fools are poets; this the Prefect feels” (“Letter” par. 98). Missing the fact that the thief was also a

mathematician, the Prefect overlooked another clue.

While solving the mystery and earning a hefty reward check, Dupin shares how hubris, motivation, and assumptions within our psyche lead and mislead humans through their lives. Like all his detective stories, it explores the internal workings of his characters through inference and logic. In contrast, Poe takes a darker turn in what drives people in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” skipping the deduction and directly exploring the hubris, motivation, and assumptions of a character who has gone mad.

In this famous short story, Poe once again presents a straightforward plot — a man becomes obsessed with his filmy-covered eye, stalks him, kills him, buries the dismembered body under the floorboards, and is driven to confession by the imagined sound of the dead man's beating heart. What makes this tale such an engaging narrative and a timeless favorite is how Poe explores the inner mental workings of the murderer before, during, and after the gruesome event. Instead of trying to prove their innocence, the narrator begins by arguing they are not mad and shares the story of how they killed an old man they lived with. They argue that their clarity and calmness throughout proves they are not insane (“Heart” par. 1). By taking this approach, Poe lets us into the mind of a murderer and explores what drove them to murder and confession. By taking the driving psychology to an extreme, Poe enables the reader to probe similar thoughts of obsession, fear, and guilt in their minds.

Obsession is the overarching psychology of the murderer. The narrator shows their obsession when they state, “once conceived, it haunted me day and night” (“Heart”

par. 2). They have no conflict with the old man, declaring, “it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye” (“heart” par. 2). This obsession grows as they spy on the old man in his sleep over multiple days, taking “an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed” (“Heart” par. 3).

The obsession then climaxes with murder when, after looking in on the old man on the eighth night, they shine a beam from a lantern into the room and sees the eye. They then begin to hear the beating of the old man’s heart. Poe builds the tension and the obsession as the killer stands in the darkness. Consumed by the image of the eye and the heartbeat, the murderer snaps and falls upon their victim with a yell (“Heart” par 11).

Fear is another part of human psychology that Poe explores just before the murder. After awakening the old man, the narrator is silent in the dark. After some time, the old man groans, and the narrator explains their own battle with terror in a way that many who have sat awake in the dark have experienced. The narrator shares, “Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me” (“Heart” par. 7).

The story ends with a look at overwhelming guilt that eventually drives the narrator to confess their crime. After the police come to investigate a report of a man screaming, the narrator slowly falls apart. Their guilt, manifested in the imagined sound of the dead man’s heart beating, grows and grows until “I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!” (“Heart” par. 17).

In pioneering the modern short story, Edgar Allen Poe showed how to achieve a

concise and engaging narrative by removing lengthy descriptions and flowery dialog and replacing them with a look at the characters' psychology. In doing so, Poe also pulls the reader deeper into the story because presenting relatable motivation and emotion helps the reader experience the account more directly. Exploring the human thoughts of the characters also makes them more believable and realistic.

Works Cited.

Poe, Edgar Allen, "The Purloined Letter." *The Works of Edgar Allen Poe; The Raven Edition*, 1st ed., New York, P. F. Collier & Son, 1904

Poe, Edgar Allen, "The Tell-Tale Heart." *The Works of Edgar Allen Poe; The Raven Edition*, 1st ed., New York, P. F. Collier & Son, 1904