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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and
Croatian Language and Literature

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Narrative Perspective in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Full Professor

Osijek, 2022

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of the narrative perspective in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories – the horror story “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the adventure story “MS. Found in a Bottle,” and the detective story “The Purloined Letter.” Drawing upon narrative theory, it argues that the narrative perspective is an important aspect of Poe's literary technique and one of the key instruments in producing the ultimate narrative effect. Even though all three stories employ first-person narration and reflect the conventions of their respective genres – “The Tell-Tale Heart” relies on mystery, murder, and gore, “MS. Found in a Bottle” contains life-or-death situations and the propensity for the unknown, and “The Purloined Letter” describes an unsolvable case ready to be cracked – there are significant differences in the way their narrative voice is constructed and perceived. Unlike “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which is told by an unreliable narrator whose delusion and irrational actions undermine his claim to reliability, the focalization in “MS. Found in a Bottle” presents an unbelievable story through an *autodiegetic* narrator whose rationality shapes the story's final effect. Likewise, the *homodiegetic* narrator in “The Purloined Letter” significantly contributes to the story's innovative narrative effect. The paper maintains that their narrative perspectives make Poe's stories worth analyzing as they raise the (still very relevant) questions of credibility and reliability not just in literature but also in every single medium.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, narrative perspective, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “MS. Found in a Bottle,” “The Purloined Letter.”

Introduction

Literature is a form of entertainment. Many read it casually, while others look at it more critically or academically. Regardless of the way one looks at it, one can find enjoyment and satisfaction from it. The effect varies, depending mainly on the genre. Comedies make the readers laugh; dramas make them emotional, and science-fiction makes them wonder. However, there are not many cases of a writer working and being accomplished in different genres. Edgar Allan Poe certainly was one of them. While remembered mainly for his horror stories, he also excelled in writing adventure and detective stories. This paper analyzes three Edgar Allan Poe's stories: the horror story "The Tell-Tale Heart," the adventure story "MS. Found in a Bottle," and the detective story "The Purloined Letter." A common trait that unites those stories is that they are told in first-person. Therefore, this paper will foremost analyze and discuss the narrative voice and the importance of the narrative perspective in these stories.

As Poe's life is deeply connected to his work, the first chapter will provide a short biography of Edgar Allan Poe in order to emphasize the links between his writing and his tragic life. Based on Susan Lanser's and Lucie Guillemette and Cynthia Lévesque's interpretations of Gérard Genette's narrative theory, the second chapter discusses narratological concepts that will be applied in the analysis of Poe's horror, adventure, and detective stories in the third, fourth, and fifth chapter, respectively.

This paper argues that the narrative perspective and narrative reliability have a profound impact on how a story is presented and perceived. It also aims to demonstrate why certain narrators are reliable while others are not and that narrative reliability can be perceived from both the characters' description and their behavior.

1. About the Author

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most important American writers. His influence is undeniable, and his legacy will live on forever. Today, he is remembered as a literary icon, but his life, much like his stories, was tragic. Edgar Allan Poe was born as Edgar Poe, the second of three children to Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe and David Poe, Jr., in Boston, Massachusetts on January 19, 1809 (Hourly History 6). A tragedy ensued almost immediately in his life because both of his parents died within the first three years of his life. Because of that, he and his siblings were sent to different foster-care families. Edgar Poe went to live with a wealthy man, John Allan, and his wife, Frances Valentine Allan: "While the Allans never formally adopted Poe, they gave him the name Edgar Allan Poe and had him baptized in the Episcopal Church" (Hourly History 6). Edgar and John had a turbulent relationship. John wanted Edgar to be a successful businessman, just like he was, but Edgar did not share that desire. Instead, he developed an interest in literature and wanted to be a great writer like Lord Byron. Because of the difference in opinion regarding Edgar's future, the relationship between Poe and his foster father became tense (Hourly History 6-7).

In 1826, Edgar Allan Poe went to college at the University of Virginia. He was a good student, but he got more and more in debt, which resulted in his dropping out the college before finishing the first term. Poe's failure in college only hurt the already rocky relationship between him and his foster father. That period of his life was purely disappointing for Poe; his college attempt was a failure, and his love interest, Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, was to marry another man. After a fight, Allan kicked Poe out of his home. Poe then went to Boston and worked small jobs while writing under the pseudonym of Henri Le Rennet. He still needed money, so he turned to the United States military and entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (Hourly History 7-10).

During his time at West Point, in July 1827, Poe published his first book of poetry, "Tamerlane and Other Poems." In 1829, he published his second collection of poetry, "Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems." Later, he published his third poetry collection, "Poems." Edgar Allan Poe was doing quite well in the army; however, he never thoroughly enjoyed the army; his only dream was to be a writer. In 1831, Poe was convicted of dereliction of duty and expelled from West Point (Hourly History 7-10).

After his military career, Poe reached out to his biological father's family, which lived in Baltimore: "Poe's aunt Maria Clemm took him in and treated him as if he was her own

son” (Hourly History 11). Her daughter was Virginia Eliza Clemm, who later had a relationship with Edgar: “She and Poe would spark their own romantic relationship, even though she was his first cousin and more than a decade younger than him” (Hourly History 11). Later, they married when he was 27 years old and she was only 13. During Poe’s time in Baltimore, John Allan died, and Edgar was not even mentioned in the will. His life improved when he got a job in *Southern Literary Messenger* after publishing several short stories. Poe became successful while working for *Southern Literary Messenger*, not due to his stories or poems but because of his unapologetic literary reviews: “Within one year’s time, Poe made the *Southern Literary Messenger* the most popular magazine in the south” (Hourly History 13). After that, he changed jobs, but he still wrote harsh literary critiques. In 1839, Edgar Allan Poe published the story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and that cemented him as one of the unique writers of his time. He was one of the very first people to explore the horror genre. He changed jobs again and moved once again. That period of his life is not only important because of his work in the horror genre but also because of his invention of the detective genre. Edgar Allan Poe was a heavy drinker throughout these years, but when his wife got sick, he started to drink even more. In 1843, Poe published the story “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which is considered by many to be one of his best short stories. In January 1845, Poe’s poem “The Raven” was published in the *Evening Mirror*. It was immediately successful, and because of it, Poe became popular. It could be said that he became a celebrity. He drew more attention and people to himself: “He used this fame to lobby harder for higher pay for writers’ work. Even though ‘The Raven’ was a huge success, Poe was only paid \$9 for the poem by the magazine. Poe felt writers deserved more for their talents” (Hourly History 20). In other words, Edgar Allan Poe made no money from “The Raven” even though it was a huge success. His tragic life was followed by the tragic death of his wife, Virginia, in 1847 (Hourly History 11-24).

In the period following his wife death, Poe again wandered from town to town, trying to make money and promote his magazine. His tragic life came to an end when he went missing in Baltimore for five days. When he was found, he was wearing someone else’s clothes: “Poe died on October 7, 1849, four days after he had been brought into the hospital. He was 40 years old” (Hourly History 25). The cause of Poe’s death is still uncertain, but the vast majority agree that it was alcohol-related (Hourly History 24-25).

2. The Theoretical Framework

A few concepts need to be addressed when talking about narration and narrative perspective. First, the concepts of “narrative” and “narration” need to be differentiated. Simply put, the narrative is the story itself, while the narration is how the story is told. The narrative can be seen in all branches of art containing a story – in books, movies, TV shows, plays, video games, etc. On the other hand, narration is vital when telling a story because it determines the tone, atmosphere, and so much more. Through narration, a scary story can be turned into a comedy. That is why narration is worth analyzing.

The story itself can be told in three different ways – through first person, second person, and third person narration. Those three types of narration are traditional types and are called points of view. The first-person narration is simple; it contains a lot of first-person singular pronouns, “I” and “me.” A person is telling a story from his/her point of view, and the readers know as much as the narrator does. The second-person narration is not that popular. In the second-person narration, the narrator directly addresses the readers, and the pronoun “you” is often used. The third-person narration is mainly used in longer novels and has an external, all-knowing narrator who describes everything.

One of the key theories of the narrative voice and narrative perspective is the narrative discourse theory developed by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette. Genette distinguishes “between *voice* (‘who speaks’) and *vision* (‘who sees?’). The concept of voice encompasses distinctions about the narrator’s relation to the story, the time of narration, and narrative level” (Lanser 37). According to Genette, “the persona who ‘sees’ the events of the story need not be the persona who speaks because the narrator can cede to the perceptual sphere of a character without giving up phraseological control” (qtd. in Lanser 37). Accordingly, the difference between *voice* and *vision* is important because you could have a narrator that speaks – s/he is in control, and the readers follow him/her. However, if s/he cannot see and understand everything around him/her, his/her narration is limited.

Genette also distinguishes between the unfocalized and the degree zero focalization. The degree zero focalization is characterized by a narrator who knows more than the characters do. This is “the traditional ‘omniscient narrator’ who may know the facts about all of the protagonists, as well as their thoughts and gestures” (Guillemette and Lévesque). Apart from that, Genette defines the internal and external focalization. Basically, in internal focalization, “the narrator is restricted to what a character knows, thinks, and feels,” while in

external focalization, “the narrator is restricted only to what can be outwardly observed” (38). The internal focalization is the first-person narration, and the reader knows as much as the narrator does. This limits the story in many ways, but those limitations can also help the story. If the reader knows as much as the narrator does, the story’s impact on the narrator will be the same as its impact on the readers. When there is an all-knowing reader, the story is no longer limited but can also have a positive impact. The reader can know certain information that the narrator does not know, and getting to that information can be a unique and exciting experience. Both of those focalizations are often used, and, depending on the story and genre, one focalization will fit the story better than the other. Focalization is, therefore, a crucial narrative technique as “the focalizer is the presence – the recorder, the camera, the consciousness – through whose spatial, temporal, and/or psychological position the textual events are perceived” (Lanser 141). Focalization is not only important for the story but for the reader as well as everything that the reader absorbs comes through the focalizer.

Reliability is another important narrative instrument. According to Genette, “a narrator can be perfectly reliable with respect to the ‘facts’ of a given story, but unreliable regarding opinions and judgments about the story world” (qtd. in Lanser 40). This part of Genette’s theory is important for this paper since reliability is an important facet of Poe’s fiction. Genette provides a realistic view of the topic. Often, when reading a text with a narrator, s/he can seem reliable in describing specific details of his/her lives, but the complete opposite when commenting on specific events and people. Precisely through those comments, and the narrator’s deductive reasoning, can someone conclude whether or not such a narrator is reliable:

Genette explains that in order for any story to exist, there must be a narrator who brings it into existence; that narrator, therefore, exists on a “diegetic” or narrative level, immediately higher than the level of the story itself. The narrator of a text, in other words, must have an existence that precedes the narration, and this narrator’s story is subordinate to the previous level. (Lanser 133)

In order to get into a story and the life of a narrator, s/he has to be a *real person*. His/her life has to *exist* before the reader meets the narrator him/herself. Because of that, the narrator is more important than the story because the story changes depending on the narrator’s upbringing and views on life. In other words, the story will always change depending on the narrator’s experience.

Reevaluating the traditional classification of narration, Genette invented the terms *heterodiegetic*, “to describe a narrator who is not a character in the story,” and *homodiegetic*, “to describe a narrator who is also a character” (Lanser 158). Furthermore, “among homodiegetic narrators Genette further distinguishes those who are *autodiegetic*, that is, who function as the central protagonist in the tale they are narrating” (Lanser 158). In traditional terminology, the *heterodiegetic narration* is the third-person narration and the *homodiegetic narration* is the first-person narration. The difference between the *homodiegetic* and the *autodiegetic* narrator is that the *autodiegetic* narrator is always the protagonist, while the *homodiegetic* narrator can be a side character that only witnesses the protagonist’s experiences.

Lastly, a heterodiegetic, or third-person narrator, can also be omniscient and “have access to every character’s mind” (Lanser 161). An omniscient, all-knowing narrator is the most frequently used type of narrator in addition to other narrator types, such as a limited third-person narrator. Whether or not the narrator is all-knowing or limited is incredibly important to the story. The all-knowing narrator knows everything and describes everything as it is. By applying Genette’s narrative theory, the following chapters will explore the importance of the narrative voice and the narrative perspective in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “MS. Found in a Bottle,” and “The Purloined Letter.”

3. The Horror Genre – “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Edgar Allan Poe is undeniably most known for his short horror stories, so this paper will focus on them first. His story “The Tell-Tale Heart” will be used as an example to analyze the narrative perspective and its effects on the story. “The Tell-Tale Heart” is told by an unnamed narrator who is trying to convince the readers that he is sane. The story opens up with a statement and a question to the readers. “TRUE! — NERVOUS — VERY, VERY dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 415). Immediately, it is visible that this story is the case of a first-person narration, i.e., internal focalization. In Genette’s terms, the narrator in the story is the *voice*, but his *vision* is questionable as his sanity is uncertain. The narrator’s sanity will be one of the major focuses in this chapter.

The story follows an *autodiegetic* narrator, who tries to prove to the readers that he has not gone mad. He is trying to prove this by going into as much detail as possible regarding his actions that contradict his sanity. He talks about his plan and execution of an old man. He explains that he is ill, but not mad, and that the illness has made his sense of hearing stronger than ever. After that, he says that he loved the old man and did not have a reason to kill him. Through the narrator’s account of the prior events, Poe’s story confirms Genette’s view on the importance of the story that precedes the narration. The narrator’s story does not start with the murder, but rather, with him explaining the history of his relationship with the old man. Because of that, the reader is more engaged in the story because the narrator and the old man seem *real*.

The narrator believes that the old man’s eye was the trigger for his decision to murder him: “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. 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, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 415). The narrator describes how he went into the old man’s room every night for a week in order to observe him and prepare for the eventual murder. He was cautious and calculated. On the eighth night, he walked in more carefully than ever, but he woke the old man. As the old man sat up in his bed, scared, wondering if there was someone else in pitch darkness with him, the narrator was filled with joy because that was his chance to kill the vulture eye. After he killed him, he cleaned up and dismembered the corpse. He hid the body underneath the flooring of the chamber. A neighbor

heard suspicious sounds and called the police. When the police arrived, the narrator was overly confident and felt the policemen could not figure out that the old man had been killed. He told them that the old man was absent from the country and that he shrieked in his sleep. Yet, the narrator then started acting in an unusual way. All of a sudden, he started being paranoid because of the sounds that he was hearing: “‘Oh God! what could I do?’ I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 419). He heard heartbeats, and he was certain the policemen were onto him. His highly sensible hearing only made things worse. He was in agony, and then he confessed: “‘Villains!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!’” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 419).

There are a few ways in which one can interpret the ending of this story. The sudden beating of a heart could be attributed to a paranormal element. There is a possibility that the dead man’s heart was truly beating, but that is unlikely. Most readers and critics agree that the narrator heard his own heart beating loudly because of the guilt and fear. Looking at the whole story, it is easy to conclude that the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is unreliable. According to Phelan, “the narrating-filter of the character’s mimetic function is always thick, because the unreliability is always linked to specific traits of the character” (98). In this sense, the unreliability can be linked to the narrator’s mental illness. In the original text, the narrator confesses that he is nervous, but in the newer editions of the story, it is said that he is ill. Readers can immediately tell that something is off about the narrator. The first example is that his hearing sense is stronger than ever because of his disease. Secondly, he tries to convince the readers that he has not gone mad. Yet, his explanation is a pure paradox. The narrator believes that his planning of the murder proves that he is not mad: “Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 415). According to Brüttsch, “In literary studies, unreliable narration is generally associated with a homodiegetic narration shaped in such a way as to allow readers to adopt an understanding of diegetic reality which differs from the narrator’s account” (221). This definition can be perfectly used to describe the difference between the readers’ and the narrator’s comprehension of the reality described in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The narrator’s reality is the one in which he is not mad. He is trying to prove his “innocence” by describing the murder. Readers, however, can see through the

illusion that he had set up. Every reader understands that the narrator is only hurting his case by talking about his actions. The irony in that is that the narrator himself cannot see that. He is convinced that he is right and that his actions ultimately do not hurt his sanity. Brüttsch also points out that “The narrator is usually not aware that his account or judgments would seem problematic to the addressee” (222). In other words, the narrator is unaware he is in the wrong. As Brüttsch explains, even though for the reader the narrator’s statements are ironic, for the narrator, they are not. He sees no irony in them; he truly means everything he has said: “In the literary prototype, the reader is not deceived (or is so only at the very beginning) but, on the contrary, recognizes illusions or misunderstandings on the part of the narrator” (Brüttsch 223). In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” readers immediately understand that there is something wrong with the narrator, or at least with his way of thinking. His illness is suspicious, and his behavior is not natural. Illusions and his misunderstanding of the situation are obvious to the readers, and that is why it is clear that he is an unreliable narrator. This raises the question of how much can someone trust an unreliable narrator. It can be said for certain that the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” did plan and kill the old man. It can also be said that he turned himself in. Those facts are undeniable. However, his state of mind is questionable as is his perception of the vulture eye. The narrator has his own truth, which is undeniable to him. As he confesses, he had no reason to kill the old man, and the idea of murder came to him out of nowhere. He even goes as far as to say that he loved the old man. Despite that, he planned the murder for a week and killed the man in cold blood. Hating a certain part of a man, especially the one not in his control (eye), is out of the ordinary. Hating it so much that the murder is the only solution proves the delusion in the narrator’s life. Brüttsch argues that an unreliable narrator is often destabilized: “The more dubious the character, odd the behavior, fragile the disposition, and stressful the situation, the more probable that the narrator may appear destabilized to the reader” (229). Accordingly, it is evident that the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is destabilized. The narrator is dubious; his manner and his thought process confirm that. His behavior is odd, especially considering that he was normal or acting more normally before his illness. Ever since he got sick, his behavior and sense of hearing changed, which also proves the oddness and validity of the illness itself. His fragile disposition is also visible, mainly through his outlook on the vulture eye and his health assessment. Furthermore, Brüttsch emphasizes the stressful situation and the narrator’s behavior. The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” did not have a problem planning the murder, and he certainly was not stressed on the eighth night. That can be easily explained. Due to his

deteriorating mental state, he felt better while planning the murder and was the happiest during the execution itself. The problem occurred when the stress came from other sources, such as the policemen. As soon as they arrived, the problems came with them. His mental downfall is best seen in the scene when his guilt turns into a paranormal phenomenon. Delusion becomes the truth, and the dead man's heart turns into a beating one. Even though the policemen sit still, believing the lies that the narrator tells them, he is paranoid; he is the one that completely changed. When they first came, he was overly confident and calm, and by the end of their conversation, he is mad:

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. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder! (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 419)

The narrator's confession came from his madness and delusion. He did not feel any remorse or sadness. Even though he did like the man, he had to kill him. The vulture eye was gone, but so was the old man. That is why the narrator's opening statements are questionable, just like everything else he says. The fact that he is unreliable benefits the story. The plot is already creepy and mysterious in itself, and the fact that the person narrating it is unstable and that the readers are unable to fully differentiate what is true and what is not (just like the narrator) sets the tone and reinforces the effect that the story is trying to achieve.

4. The Adventure Genre – “MS. Found in a Bottle”

Most readers associate Poe with his horror stories, but he was equally proficient at writing in other genres. Apart from the horror genre, Edgar Allan Poe also wrote adventure stories. In Poe's time, adventure stories were not as popular as horror stories, and today, Poe is mainly remembered for his horror stories, while his adventure stories have been critically neglected. This chapter will focus on the narrator and the narrator's perspective in one of his most famous adventure stories “MS. Found in a Bottle.”

Just like in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “MS. Found in a Bottle” also relies on first-person narration or internal focalization. The story opens up with an *autodiegetic* narrator who is talking about himself:

Hereditary wealth afforded me an education of no common order, and a contemplative turn of mind enabled me to methodize the stores which early study very diligently garnered up.—Beyond all things, the study of the German moralists gave me great delight; not from any ill-advised admiration of their eloquent madness, but from the ease with which my habits of rigid thought enabled me to detect their falsities. (Poe, “MS. Found in a Bottle” 184)

Looking at his background, from his education to his interests, it is evident that the narrator is rational. He thinks highly of himself and points out that he is much more rational than other people: “I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime; and the Pyrrhonism of my opinions has at all times rendered me notorious” (Poe, “MS. Found in a Bottle” 184). As previously mentioned, it is important for a narrator to seem *real*. In this case, the narrator is presenting himself in total honesty. He is talking about his character and what people like and dislike about him. His description is important for the story because it not only adds layers to the narrator's character but also benefits the story as he becomes more relatable and human. Apart from the importance of him seeming real, those opening sentences are vital because they benefit his rationality, which will be important later in his story.

The narrator's rationality makes his story more believable and relatable to the readers. More importantly, unlike the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator in “MS. Found in a Bottle” is reliable. Even though he describes an incredible and unbelievable experience he has had, because of his character, as presented in his opening statements, the readers believe

him. The narrator characterizes himself for a reason. By pointing out that he is a person who *suffers* from a lack of imagination, his story is believable. If a person with a rich imagination told his story, many would not believe it. Yet, since the narrator is reasonable, his story turns into a possible one.

After a brief introduction, he starts recounting his adventurous sea story. On his voyage from the island of Java, he was a passenger. He was the first to notice a mysterious cloud and felt as if it could be a sign of some disaster, such as Simoon. The ship's captain ignores the narrator's worries, which results in the ship ending up in a whirlpool. Only the narrator and a Swede miraculously survived out of every single man on the ship. After that, the waters carried them to the South Pole, where they saw another ship:

Casting my eyes upwards, I beheld a spectacle which froze the current of my blood. At a terrific height directly above us, and upon the very verge of the precipitous descent, hovered a gigantic ship of, perhaps, four thousand tons. Although upreared upon the summit of a wave more than a hundred times her own altitude, her apparent size exceeded that of any ship of the line or East Indiaman in existence. (Poe, "MS. Found in a Bottle" 188)

Intrigued and amazed, the narrator climbs the ship and sees people. The mystery element in this adventure story lies in the crew members of the second ship. For some reason, none of the crew members can see the narrator. He is walking past them, and they do not react. He uses that advantage to look around the ship and finds ink and paper. The narrator then decides to write a manuscript which he will put in a bottle and throw in the sea, hoping that someone will read it. Because the story is set up like a journal, the readers get a feeling of actually reading someone's story. Interestingly, the narrator's entries in the manuscript get shorter as time progresses because everything around him falls apart. That small detail is incredibly meaningful to the story because it benefits the validity of his experience.

Looking at the whole story and comparing a reliable and an unreliable narrator, it can be said that

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect. There can, of course, be

different degrees of unreliability. But how can the reader know whether he is supposed to trust or distrust the narrator's account? (Jakobson and Pomorska 100)

That is a great question because there is no clear answer. It is up to the reader to decide whether he/she will believe the narrator's words.

Looking at the narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle," it is not entirely certain whether he is reliable or not, and that is the beauty of narration. Comparing the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and the narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle," it is evident that they are different. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the reader immediately sees that the narrator is not healthy. Every single word he says has to be taken with a grain of salt. However, the situation in "MS. Found in a Bottle" is entirely different. Even though the situation in which the narrator found himself seems unbelievable and borderline paranormal, the readers can believe him because of his character and the situation he is in. He is basically writing his last message in hopes that someone would stumble across the bottle and read it. Considering what kind of a person he is, there is no reason for him to lie in his last message to the world.

In both short stories, the introductory paragraph is incredibly important, mainly because both introductions set the tone and describe the narrators. Those few sentences show that those two narrators will behave and react differently. When the first ship sank, the narrator explained it like this: "We had no means of calculating time, nor could we form any guess of our situation. We were, however, well aware of having made farther to the southward than any previous navigators, and felt great amazement at not meeting with the usual impediments of ice" (Poe, "MS. Found in a Bottle" 187). Both he and the Swede were losing hope, but they were fighting for their lives. However, they were not entirely down because they were thinking about their achievement. They were in a territory that no man was ever in, and that meant something. The narrator sees the positive side of this situation and holds onto that positivity of the achievement. On the contrary, the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is mad and cannot think straight even when he is not in a life-or-death situation. Because of that, it can be concluded that if he were in the ship-sinking situation, his experience and reaction would be completely different from those of the narrator of "MS. Found in a Bottle." The former is a man with a haunted spirit, while, on the other hand, the latter is a perfect example of a man with an adventurous spirit. He is skeptical and adventurous, and those traits prevail even in his darkest times. Facing a certain death and losing hope does not destroy him. In his manuscript, he describes those moments vividly and

in complete honesty. He talks honestly about looking in the face of death as well as about the *paranormal* surroundings. The narrator's personality and how he describes everything proves that he is a reliable narrator who went through many calamities. He survived certain death, and then he was saved and surrounded by some unexplainable things. His last wish is for someone to hear his story. He needs that, especially by the end, when even he knows that that is his last voyage. The fact that he cares so much about another individual to hear his story proves that he is indeed telling the truth. Whereas the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" wants the readers to believe that he is not mad, even though his own madness blinds him and he is delusional to the point where he uses murder as proof, the narrator of "MS. Found in a Bottle" is not trying to prove anything about himself or his life. He wants to tell his unique adventure story. His last wish is not to be seen in a certain way but to share his experience with other people and let them hear his last story.

5. The Detective Genre – “The Purloined Letter”

Edgar Allan Poe also wrote detective stories. His name is not synonymous with the detective genre even though he is considered the creator of the first modern detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” This chapter will focus on his other famous detective story “The Purloined Letter.”

“The Purloined Letter” starts with a first-person narrator who says that he is sitting with his friend C. Auguste Dupin. The reader can immediately recognize that Dupin and his unnamed friend – the narrator – are the same characters from Poe’s previous detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” If the characters’ names were not a clear sign, then mentioning their previous case definitely is as the unnamed narrator refers to the events from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” It is a story filled with gore, while “The Purloined Letter” is much more lighthearted. Unlike the *autodiegetic* narrators in the two previously mentioned and analyzed stories, the narrator in “The Purloined Letter” is a *homodiegetic* one. Like Nick Carraway from Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator in “The Purloined Letter” is a side character, the main character being Auguste Dupin.

The unnamed narrator’s thinking gets disrupted when Monsieur G——, the Prefect of the Paris police, walks in and again seeks Dupin’s help because he cannot solve a case. In contrast to the other short stories analyzed in this paper, “The Purloined Letter” is the first one in which dialogue is the primary source of information:

“Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,” said my friend. “What nonsense you do talk!” replied the Prefect, laughing heartily. “Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain,” said Dupin. “Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?” “A little too self-evident.” “Ha! ha! ha—ha! ha! ha!—ho! ho! ho!” roared our visitor, profoundly amused, “oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!”

“And what, after all, is the matter on hand?” I asked. (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 198)

The dialogue, in which the narrator himself is included, reveals that an important letter has been stolen. It is almost too simple to be true because the police know who the thief is. Monsieur G—— explains the situation: Minister D——, who is an important individual due to his ties with the government, stole the letter from a young lady. That letter is significant

because it contains certain information that could harm another powerful individual. That is why the police are keen on getting the letter back. Monsieur G—— also says that they thoroughly searched Minister D——'s residence and found nothing. Dupin advises the Prefect to go and search it again. One month after their initial conversation, the Prefect returns and tells Dupin and the narrator that the letter is still missing. He then informs them that the award for finding the letter has increased. Dupin tells him to write a check for that amount, and after the Prefect does that, Dupin gives him the missing letter. The Prefect excitedly leaves the room, and Dupin explains to the narrator how he obtained the letter. He understood that the police would look at the places where they assumed the thief would hide the letter. They were not thinking outside the box, which is why, unlike Dupin, they could not find the letter.

Dupin is presented and described as a brilliant man. Not only is he intelligent but he is also cunning. Both personality traits are important for a detective. The story focuses on the letter and the differences between the police force and the amateur private investigator.

Like in Poe's other stories, the narrator is crucial since he is, in this case, always included in the dialogue. His opinion and curiosity reveal information, such as what kind of person somebody is. For example, his description of the Prefect reveals certain traits of his personality, such as his tendency to ignore the issues he does not understand: "'That is another of your odd notions,' said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling everything 'odd' that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of 'oddities'" (Poe, "The Purloined Letter" 197). Unlike in the previous two stories, the narrator of "The Purloined Letter" is not the most important element in the story. "The Tell-Tale Heart" relies on the narrator himself, just like "MS. Found in a Bottle." Both stories need the narrator because he is the only one who sees and experiences the events. It is up to the reader to decide whether or not he is reliable. In "The Purloined Letter," however, the narrator is not even the main character. C. Auguste Dupin is the main character who solves the case. The narrator is given almost the same information as the reader; he learns the information at the same time the reader does, and that is the internal focalization, just like in the two previous stories. Dupin goes and solves the case by himself. The narrator has no idea and is not even involved in the process of solving the case. He is there almost as an observer who honestly assesses the situation. He is the voice but not the vision since he is not Dupin. If Dupin were the narrator, he would be both the voice and the vision. On the contrary, the

narrator's vision is limited because he is neither the story's protagonist nor does he go ahead and solve the case by himself.

Unlike the narrators from the previously mentioned and analyzed stories, this narrator talks neither about himself nor about his character, but his reliability can be analyzed in different ways.

First, the narrator is smart and thinks like an investigator. For example, as he learns about the case, he makes a logical assessment of the situation: “‘But this ascendancy,’ I interposed, ‘would depend upon the robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber. Who would dare—’ ‘The thief,’ said G., ‘is the Minister D—, who dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man’” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 199). He is not a bland character whose only job is to explain what is happening. He is active and shows his qualities. He immediately concludes that the robber has to know that the *victim* is aware of him. Little details like this show that he is also an important part of the investigation. His presence is vital and it can truly help Dupin.

In addition, the narrator and Dupin are great friends. When they are engaged in a serious conversation or discussion, both of them are free to say their opinion; there are no filters: “‘You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect’” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 208). Dupin’s statement that the narrator is mistaken is not a condescending one but is instead told in a more approachable and friendly way. Their friendly conversations, especially the ones connected to the case, have to be open. They have to be comfortable enough when talking in order to see every possibility and outcome. Their cases get solved, and their relationship is one of the reasons why both of them contribute to that.

Lastly, the difference between the narrator and Dupin is visible. Both are smart and think logically, but Dupin’s intelligence is superior. When Dupin reveals the solution to a problem, the narrator often questions certain decisions that are for Dupin not worth questioning: “‘But what purpose had you,’ I asked, ‘in replacing the letter by a facsimile? Would it not have been better, at the first visit, to have seized it openly, and departed?’” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter” 213). Dupin thinks of everything, even the possibility that everything could go wrong. He is prepared for every single outcome because he thinks everything through. Taking everything into account, his relationship with Dupin, as well as his

intelligence and the reference to the previous case, the narrator feels like a *real* person. He is not a narrator whose only purpose is to tell the story. His activity in the story feels right. He is not as smart as Dupin, but he can still help him. Being a sidekick to a detective or a hero in stories is often neglected because those sidekicks seem unimportant, while here, the side character contributes and makes a difference.

In a detective story, the detective is the most important part of it. His actions and thinking enrich the story itself. However, to experience a detective story through the eyes of an observer is unique. Even though the narrator is not as smart as Dupin, which is obvious but not important for the narrative perspective, he is reliable because he is smart, and the fact that he discovers everything at the same time the reader does is original and memorable.

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