

The Men We Love to Hate

An Exploration of First-Person Villainy in Poe

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Helen Pinsent's exemplary "The Men we Love to Hate" offers a compact, accessible, sharply intelligent analysis of a popular topic, the unreliable narrators of selected short stories by Edgar Allan Poe. Her style is as logical and artful as that of her subject, as evident in her introduction, with its apt allusions, its pointed rhetorical questions, its precise statements and its alliterative flair. Just as admirable is her application of theory, as she translates ponderous jargon into a crystal clear comparison of three narrators, combining skillful paraphrase, direct quotation, sharp distinctions, and graceful transitions. It is often said that Poe challenges readers to contemplate his work with a "kindred art." Ms Pinsent meets (dare I say beats?) the master at his game, thereby leaving her reader with "a sense of the fullest satisfaction."

—Dr. Judith Thompson

"You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style."
(Nabokov, *Lolita*)

Reading a story is an exercise in trust. A reader enters into an informal contract with a narrator: he or she will give credence to the story, and the narrator will present a faithful relation of events. But what happens when that relationship is compromised? Can the reader always trust that a narrator's intentions match his or her own? In the case of some of Poe's most notable villains, the narrator is inherently untrustworthy because he will not get what he wants from the reader by telling the truth. "The Cask of

Amontillado's Montresor wants approbation; "The Tell-Tale Heart's" anonymous narrator, admiration; and "William Wilson's" eponymous villain, absolution. Given these ulterior motives, it is not surprising to find that the narrators' versions of events are skewed; what is interesting is how they are skewed and what that says about the relationship between reader and narrator, as well as between the reader and the story itself.

James Phelan adds a dimension to the study of unreliable narration by introducing subcategories that he calls axes:

At the other end of [the] spectrum [of reliability] is narration that is unreliable along more than one of the three main axes of communication, that is, the axis of facts and events (where we find misreporting or underreporting), the axis of understanding/perception (where we find misreading or misinterpreting / underreading or underinterpreting) and the axis of values (where we find misregarding or misevaluating / underregarding or underevaluating).
(224)

Within these axes are two more divisions, what Phelan calls "estranging unreliability and bonding unreliability" (225). Each of these divisions refers to the relationship between narrator and reader: bonding unreliability brings the two closer and estranging distances them further (223-4). Each of the three abovementioned Poe stories involves narration that is unreliable on a different axis, as well as both bonding and estranging unreliability, working together in the

villainous narrator's attempt to gain what he wants from his reader.

The titular narrator of "William Wilson" manipulates facts and uses underreporting in a plea for absolution. In comparison to "Amontillado"'s Montresor, who more explicitly leaves out information by not detailing "[t]he thousand injuries of Fortunato" (274), the man who calls himself Wilson actually does more to distort his account of events. On the surface, his claim of a false name is to save his story from being "sullied with [his] real appellation" (626), which implies contrition and bonds narrator and reader. However, he immediately follows this claim with the declaration that his real name "has been already too much an object for [. . .] scorn" (626): including the phrase "too much" here indicates that Wilson is not entirely remorseful, and it suggests that his false name is actually a form of protection. His story then proceeds to relate in copious detail the early relationship he has with his double, ending his story before the occurrence of any of the "scorn" he feels he has received.

During the balance of the story, he indulges - and presumably attempts to humanize - himself in "seeking relief, however slight and temporary, in the weakness of a few rambling details" (627). These details, though, are largely an exercise in deferring blame. He recounts his own background and upbringing in terms that seek to limit his responsibility for his own temperament and judgement: he describes himself as having "fully inherited the family character" of being "easily excitable" (626), and places very

strong emphasis on the level of control exercised within his boarding school (627–8). Wilson’s double, according to him, is resistant to Wilson’s “ascendency” (629), and therefore has the benefit – and the blame – of supreme autonomy: “My namesake alone . . . presumed to compete with me in the studies of the class . . . to refuse implicit belief in my assertions, and submission to my will – indeed, to interfere with my arbitrary dictation” (629). Wilson cannot describe his antagonist, however, without describing his own “arbitrary dictation,” thus betraying his attempt to obscure his own culpability, and immediately undercutting his attempt at bonding. Thus, Montresor’s honesty about the events he leaves out of his story is, in fact, much more disarming than Wilson’s attempts to steer the story by manipulating facts under pretense of conveying details “stamped upon memory” (629). While Wilson longs for absolution for his crimes, the story “William Wilson” is built to frame his villainy clearly; identifying Wilson’s use of underreporting outlines the division between his goals and the story’s.

The unnamed narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” makes nothing like Wilson’s attempt to obscure the truth – on the contrary, he seems bent on revealing as much detail as possible in order to demonstrate his sanity and win admiration for his planning and execution. His unreliability instead falls along Phelan’s axis of perception. While William Wilson’s dissimulation is betrayed by telling gaps in his account that won’t admit belief, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator leaves no gaps – in fact, he pays as

much attention to the details of his narrative as he has already paid to the details of the old man's murder:

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! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it – oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then thrust in my head. Oh you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly – very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! – would a madman have been so wise as this? (303)

This passage details the narrator's fierce obsession both thematically, in what he is saying, and structurally, in the detail with which he says it. The level of obsession that this passage manifests bears witness to the narrator's madness, even if the reader ignores the familiar literary convention of asserting madness with declarations of sanity.

In addition, the narrator uses a mangled attempt at what Phelan calls “playful comparison between . . . author and narrator” (228). The technique, as Phelan describes it, involves the narrator calling attention to his or her role as storyteller to take advantage of the inherent bond between author and reader (228–9). The narrator highlights his role as author by making direct appeals to the reader: “You

fancy me mad," "You should have seen *me*," "would a madman have been so wise as this?" However, his frequent appeals, while emphasizing his authorship, also call attention to his obsession, underscoring the fact that his perception of events cannot be trusted.

The overall effect of this madness might be to inspire bonding through pity, but for the lines just preceding the above passage. In these, the narrator presents his murderous motive - "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. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!" (303) - as though his realization is happening in real time. However, he follows it shortly with "I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever" (303). This second sentence contradicts the play-by-play tone of the first, leaving a conspicuous inconsistency in the narrator's story. As if to tell the reader which statement to believe, the narrator proceeds to relate the meticulous planning and calculation involved in the murder. Although the narrator is clearly mad, the story as a whole depicts a madness of obsession, not a madness of impulse, and undermines the bonding that the narrator is attempting. Unlike William Wilson, this narrator tells the truth as he sees it, but his obsession with the old man's "Evil Eye" (303) has skewed his perception of his own merits: what he wants from the reader is a reinforcement of his distorted view.

The narrator's description of the "Evil Eye" in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is similar in contempt to Montresor's

description of Fortunato in “The Cask of Amontillado”: both use a technique Phelan calls “bonding through optimistic comparison” (232), which falls on the axis of values, as a way of winning approval. Montresor, however, uses a much more “complex coding” (Phelan 232) than the anonymous narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The anonymous narrator uses two simple capitals: rather than calling it the evil eye, he calls it the “Evil Eye.” This device is a fairly transparent effort to lend authority to the evil, thus justifying the narrator’s attempt to quash it and making the narrator appear more heroic.

Montresor, on the other hand, not only calls on overt commentary, but also on costume, setting, and dialogue to enforce his pejorative description of Fortunato. At the beginning, Montresor stresses that he has planned Fortunato’s murder for a night “during the supreme madness of the carnival season” (274) – a time conventionally associated with reversal of fortune. Montresor has already specified that his motive is revenge, but he reinforces this motive by declaring to Fortunato, “You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as I once was” (276). Even the mention of Montresor’s family motto contains the implication that he has been wounded: “*Nemo me impune lacessit*” (276). All of these details work together to prime the reader for Fortunato’s downfall. Montresor adds to these details a thoroughly unfavourable description of the man: he has “been drinking much” (274) and becomes increasingly brash and derisive as the conversation progresses, finally calling Luchesi “an

ignoramus" (277). In fact, in a sense, it is Fortunato's own ego that propels him down the tunnel to his death, since Montresor repeatedly invites him to "go back . . . [for his] health is precious" (276).

Montresor's description of Fortunato paints him as an unpleasant man; but does his description help his own case by optimistic comparison? Montresor's desire for approval falls short because of the assumption of bias inherent in first-person narration. By only giving a description of the man, and not actually relating the "thousand injuries" (274) that Fortunato has inflicted upon him, Montresor limits the reader's perception of Fortunato's horrible behaviour. Montresor would cultivate an image of himself as hero, but the story itself sets him up to look like a petulant child. Similar to the way the anonymous narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" underscores his madness by exaggerating the evil he faces, Montresor fails to elevate himself by combining his underregarding with underreporting.

Winning support for oneself as a villain relies on a complicated manipulation of the reader's pity. For the author, this essentially means a goal of lying almost believably. James Phelan describes it this way: "[f]or the complex coding to work, its marks of bonding unreliability must be sufficiently persuasive that the authorial audience seriously considers moving closer to [the villain] before estranging themselves from him" (232). Rather than having the reader hate the villain outright (saying "yes, but" (232) to the narrator's arguments), Phelan suggests that the

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author's desired reader response is "you almost got me to say 'yes, but' but I'm wise to your tricks" (232). In fact, what Poe is attempting to create are men the reader can love to hate. Under this assumption, the omissions, the misunderstandings, and the bias are all serving a specific function, though that function serves the author's design, not the narrator's. While the reader's trust in the narrator may be compromised, the reader's trust in such authors can continue unabated.

Works Cited

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