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**“The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them”:  
Edgar Allan Poe’s Experience with the Uncanny**

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**Abstract**

Edgar Allan Poe is an author known notoriously in the world of exceptionally strange and ambiguous literature, one of his most famous pieces being “The Tell-Tale Heart.” This paper examines whether Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” could be classified as weird fiction, as critics such as Michael Cisco contend. Cisco asserts that Edgar Allan Poe’s work falls under the genre of weird fiction, specifically the fantastic, which is defined by literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov as supernatural literature that contains no resolution as to which elements are supernatural. However, using Arthur Machen’s philosophical short story “The White People” and his interpretation of evil, as well as an analysis from Victorian psychologist James Cowles Prichard on mental disorders and fellow psychologist G. Mackenzie Bacon’s collection of literature from his patients, this paper provides compelling evidence to refute this claim. “The Tell-Tale Heart” and many of Poe’s texts contain no supernatural element that cannot be explained by natural phenomena, such as mental disorders. In Todorov’s theory of the supernatural, he not only identifies the fantastic as a category of weird fiction, but he also suggests the uncanny, which is defined as literature in which the supernatural elements contain a rational explanation. Using Todorov’s theory and the mentioned texts, this essay argues that Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart” falls under the uncanny classification of weird fiction, not the fantastic. Categorizing Poe’s work within Todorov’s uncanny deepens the experience of what terror truly is and contributes to the discussion surrounding the nature of mental illness.

**Keywords:** cosmic horror, mental illness, supernatural, the fantastic, the uncanny, weird fiction

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## 1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe is an author notoriously known for his terrifying and macabre short stories, one of his most famous being “The Tell-Tale Heart.” This is the chilling story of a man who kills his neighbor out of his obsession with the old man’s evil eye that he felt was haunting him. The weird tale ends with the man confessing his murder to the police in a state of mania, after hearing the beating of a heart coming from the floorboard, in which he had hidden the evidence, grow louder and louder. “The Tell-Tale Heart” is no doubt a very strange story. It incites the question of whether this story, and whether other literature by Poe, expands into the genre of weird fiction. Michael Cisco, a critic and expert in the field of weird tales, asserts that yes, he does. Cisco goes even further to identify Poe as a cosmic horror writer. Although I agree with the idea that Poe, and more specifically his story “The Tell-Tale Heart” crosses over the boundary between horror and weird fiction, I disagree with the contention that the author and the story also classify as cosmic horror. Instead, Poe and his “The Tell-Tale Heart” can be categorized under weird fiction in an alternate way: the Uncanny. This identification that what authors have interpreted as “evil” has been the portrayal of mental illness and those who are psychologically different may have contributed to the past mistreatment and punishment of those with disorders, as well as modern implications on how we view mental illnesses.

## 2. The Fantastic and Cosmic Horror in Poe Literature

Michael Cisco’s analysis of the supernatural and cosmic horror, and their relation to H.P Lovecraft and Poe, in “The Lovecraftian Poe: Essays on Influence, Reception, Interpretation, and Transformation” is quite convincing in how he chooses to characterize them. The way he starts with the basics of the supernatural, then integrates the way Poe uses the supernatural and his understanding of evil to create a philosophical aspect that is so commonly used in cosmic horror is a very compelling argument. Yet the further I began to analyze the cosmic horror and how he characterizes the genre, I began to find more discrepancies between Poe and this classification. But, to understand the classification of cosmic horror, there needs to be an understanding of weird fiction and how they interchange. Specifically, there needs to be an understanding of the core value of stories categorized by these genres, the supernatural. In basic terms, Cisco explains the concept as something that represents any object or being that escapes the natural laws that govern reality. This is one of the core values of weird fiction as it is what creates the remarkable feeling of unease intended by this genre. Cosmic horror also has this characteristic, which is what contributes to what I believe to be a correct view by Cisco: cosmic horror is a subgenre of weird fiction that falls under the fantastical category.

Now that there is an understanding of how the supernatural serves as a bridge between cosmic horror and weird fiction, there can be an analysis of how they differ. Cisco asserts that cosmic horror has a much deeper, more philosophical meaning that can connect back to our reality bound by natural laws, which is why he inquires whether Poe falls under this category. Poe takes a different approach to how he utilizes the supernatural than other authors, which is what creates this common effect of cosmic horror. Cisco explains that Poe does not present the dichotomy of choice offered in most weird tales. This is the turning point of the story where it is up to the reader to decide what is the supernatural. In most cases, this choice is whether there is a supernatural being, or if the character who is sensing that being is having a supernatural

experience. When it comes to Poe, the reader knows what the supernatural aspect of the story is, but instead, it is up to them to interpret how it relates back to the natural and realistic world. Although very critical of Kant, Poe uses the ideas of Kant about symbolism to create this effect. By utilizing this technique, Poe writes a supernatural that is much more palpable and realistic than the average weird fiction may. Another key distinction between cosmic horror and weird fiction is that cosmic horror is inherently more conducive to depicting evil due to the different kinds of terror these stories create. He explains these stories do not create a fear of meeting the supernatural aspect at play, but instead, it is the fear of our sense of certainty and reality being threatened, which is exactly what Poe does. We can see this dissension when Cisco asserts, “by following the implicit reasoning of both Poe and Lovecraft, we see that the supernatural presents itself not as it is usually understood that is, as an alternative to madness, an aberration of mind, a mistake, a trick, or an independent transcendence of nature—but rather as the inability to distinguish between inner and outer, psychology and physics” (Cisco, 77). The author believes that Poe can create this kind of horror and fear because of his deep understanding of the mechanisms of fear, and how to utilize the psychology of terror. These all work together to create that sensation of unease among readers, which is a key characteristic of weird fiction, and therefore also cosmic horror. Although the assertion that Poe, and by extension his story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, should be characterized as a cosmic horror is a compelling one, I offer up an alternate theory. My contention is that this story cannot be categorized as such because not only is there no supernatural that cannot be explained by a rational phenomenon, but also the main character is not inherently evil. Poe’s understanding of terror and evil does not create a fear that threatens our sense of reality; instead, it is inherently more terrifying because it fits within the constraints of what we identify as reality.

### **3. Defining Evil**

In order to argue that the man in “*The Tell-Tale Heart*” is not inherently evil, there needs to be not only an understanding of what it means to be evil but also how weird tale authors distinguish the phenomenon. Arthur Machen is a prominent weird fiction author who often explores the ideas of true evil and sin, especially in the essayistic prologue that precedes one of his most well-known stories, “*The White People*.” In the prologue of his piece, Machen explains what he believes evil to be, which I believe is a contention that many weird fiction authors would also subscribe to, but that I dissent from. He begins his assertion by stating, “We think that a man who does evil to us and to his Neighbours must be very evil. So he is, from a social standpoint; but can't you realize that Evil in its essence is a lonely thing, a passion of the solitary, individual soul?” (Machen, 115). He starts by almost discrediting the idea that evil is constrained by our rational ideal and our societal norm of what is right and wrong. Instead, he maintains the idea that this phenomenon is not something society can so easily identify; it is a predisposed state that is more privately kept. When discussing sin, Machen has an interesting answer: “What would your feelings be, seriously, if your cat or your dog began to talk to you, and to dispute with you in human accents? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad. And suppose the stones in the road began to swell and grow before your eyes, and if the pebble that you noticed at night had shot out stony blossoms in the morning? 'Well, these examples may give you some notion of what sin really is.'” (Machen, 116). His argument is that those who are truly evil are

those who were born naturally different than others, causing them to have unnatural thoughts. Machen feels that those born like this that have certain thoughts and urges that cannot be controlled are inherently evil and considered the real sin, due to the fact that they defy the natural constraints on their existence.

Even if those considered to be like this were not to act on these thoughts, they are to be considered eviler than those who act immorally based on societal standards. Under these circumstances, the man in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is inherently evil, not because he killed the man, but because of his irrational, paranoid thoughts and urges. Machen would assert the idea that the man in this story is evil and supernatural in himself due to the way he naturally thinks and feels. Machen's theory of evil and this idea that the man is evil is an outdated stance on our modern thinking when it comes to mental illness. Psychologist James Gilligan argues that when it comes to mental illness, it would be an error to view behavior through the lens of morality at all. He even reduces the idea of morality to an “archaic prescientific language” that has been used to only criticize, blame, and shame people instead of its purpose which is to guide conduct (qtd. In Martin 119). Although philosophers like Mike W. Martin would disagree that there is no place for morality in the relationship between mental illness and criminal behavior, Martin does agree that there should be “an optimistic, forward-looking emphasis on preventing and curing violence by improving mental health and applying ideals of both caring and fair punishment” along with the consideration of moral values (Martin, 119).

By these standards, Poe's story cannot be ethically viewed as a manifestation of supernatural or metaphysical evil. The man's irrational thoughts are not a sign of the supernatural; they are instead a part of mental illness and this identification being closely compared to evil contributes to the negative connotations surrounding those with disorders. In Bruce A. Arrigo's *Punishing the Mentally Ill*, he contends that the law “has fostered a system of care that has led to the abandonment of the mentally disordered” and where “psychiatric citizens are punished for being different” (Arrigo xix). He explains that our feelings and understandings of mental illnesses are “mostly unconscious,” but nonetheless have great influence (Arrigo xix). In order to confront the assumptions and progressively undo social stigmas surrounding our understandings of mental illness, there must be a rationalization of the true nature of mental illness and a deconstruction of any connotations that connect mental illness to metaphysical “evil.” Analyzing and interpreting past misconceptions of mental illness through the use of weird fiction could be one step closer to doing so.

#### **4. Mental Illness in Weird Fiction Texts**

In fact, this wrongful identification can be seen when comparing the writings of weird fiction to actual mental disorder accounts. In Machen's “The White People,” he uses a direct account through the diary of a young girl who is believed to be truly evil. They are similar to incomprehensible nonsense that can be found in the writings of those who have been found to have some sort of mental disorder or are clinically insane. In G. Mackenzie Bacon's *On the Writing of the Insane*, there are many parallels between the young girl's account in Machen's essay and the first account he discussed, which is of a man who had experienced chronic insanity and was under Bacon's care for several years at an asylum. His writings during his times of mania are quite intriguing since they do not seem to be events that could occur in our reality,

similar to those in “The White People.” While in the asylum, the man wrote: “I have been here about six weeks, and have been tyrannized over the last three months by a set of little devils who call themselves Catholics. They are about 2 feet 6 inches to 4 feet in height; they watched me about London and C.; they parade the fields adjoining this building day and night. I have heard screams from ladies often—all the Princesses of the Royal House are obliged to wonder about these fields frequently; if they attempt to get away from these tyrannies they stop and torture them” (Bacon 6). Everything about this account from the delusions of the “little devils” that guide his behavior and their incohesive size to the hallucinations of screaming is out of the ordinary. His creation of incomprehensible beings, the small devilish figures, are very comparable to the beings seen by the little girl that Machen writes of: “I may write something about all these things but not the way to do them, for peculiar reasons. And I must not say who the Nymphs are, or the Dôls, or Jeelo, or what volas mean” (Machen, 125). They both also cultivate peculiar scenes that seem incoherent to the average reader: the chronically insane man describes those devilish beings that “parade the fields” and terrorize the princesses, and the little girl details her account of “the white people”: “... I sat quite still and watched, and out of the water and out of the wood came two wonderful white people, and they began to play and dance and sing” (Machen, 126).

In terms of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the man's erratic behavior can easily be identified as a mental disorder; more specifically in the time of Poe literature, we can go on to define the narrator as having monomania and even go on to assert he could be partially insane. In his book *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind*, British ethnologist James Cowles Prichard defines monomania, or partially insane, as when “the understanding is partially disordered or under the influence of some particular illusion, referring to one subject, and involving one train of ideas, while the intellectual powers appear, when exercised on other subjects, to be in a great measure unimpaired” (Prichard, 6). The “evil eye” of the old man that haunts him and cultivates his obsession to murder is just the fascination of his monomania. The same could be identified when it comes to his hearing or hallucination of the beating heart he experienced while the old man was terrorized as well as at the end of the story, which inevitably led to his confession. This hallucination is very comparable to that of the man in Bacon's first account of his analysis when he explains that “Before admission to the Asylum, [the man] went to the police to complain of shrieks he thought he heard from a cellar...” (Bacon 6) and similarly when the man writes that he had heard screams from the Princess being terrorized by devilish beings. The man in “The Tell-Tale Heart” even confesses at the beginning: “The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them” (Poe, 13), which further incites us to believe that this is a form of mental illness.

Now that we have a more comprehensive understanding of mental disorders, not only can we better identify when someone may have an illness, but we know that they are uncontrollable and by no means make one “evil.” In fact, society even chooses to show those with mental disorders mercy often. If the narrator from “The Tell-Tale Heart” had lived in today's society, it is very possible he may have been found to be not criminally responsible for his actions, or not guilty by reason of insanity. In fact, Arrigo suggests that the legal and psychiatric definitions of mental illness may be to blame when it comes to the mistreatment of the mentally ill when it comes to the criminal justice system. This is in large part due to the fact that “clinicolegal

discourse” takes authority in the courtroom; therefore, any other alternate manifestation of mental illness is invalidated (Arrigo, 142). The past and continued punishment of those who are mentally ill are in part due to outdated assumptions concerning psychological differences. These assumptions, to some extent, could be facilitated through the continued discredited equation of psychological difference with “evil” in fictional texts. The definition of what is evil has taken a complete transformation now that there is an understanding that those who are mentally ill have no control over how they were naturally born into this world. This “unnatural” way of being, as Machen would have called it, is not something that those with mental disorders should be punished for and it most certainly should not be classified as evil. With the consideration of the man being mentally ill, not only does the story lack a real supernatural aspect, but also a form of inherent evil that is common in cosmic horror.

## **5. The Uncanny**

Considering the assertion that “The Tell-Tale Heart” cannot be identified as cosmic horror due to the fact that it contains no real phenomena of evil or aspect of supernatural, the question remains on how to categorize the tale and whether it could still be considered weird fiction. Tzvetan Todorov is a literary theorist famous for his theory of the supernatural and fantastical in which he wrote *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. The fantastic is a category of weird fiction, of which Cisco identifies cosmic horror to be a part, that contains no resolution as to what is the supernatural and what is “reality.” This is called the dichotomy of choice, something that, as Cisco points out, Poe does not utilize. This further encourages the belief that Poe does not subscribe to cosmic horror, but Michael Cisco critiques this concept from Todorov. Despite this, Todorov theorizes that there are two other categories of weird fiction: the marvelous and the uncanny, the marvelous being when the supernatural aspect of a story is resolved to be supernatural, and the uncanny being when the supernatural aspect of a story is explained by rationality. In this case, we will discuss the latter. Having discredited the idea that the man in this story is experiencing a supernatural phenomenon and discovered the true rational explanation, which is mental illness, it is quite logical to categorize “The Tell-Tale Heart” as part of the uncanny subgenre of weird fiction.

## **6. Interpretations**

The assertion made above that The Tell-Tale Heart contains no real supernatural aspect, does not utilize any real sense of evil, and can therefore be identified under the category of the uncanny in weird fiction almost shows how Poe’s understanding of terror and reality contributes to his tales. Cisco asserts the idea that Poe utilizes objects and beings of weird fiction to terrorize the reader by threatening their reality. I assert the idea that Poe’s deep understanding of terror prompts him to horrify readers by writing things that are under the reader’s assumption of being out of the ordinary when he is writing of phenomena that are very much bound by our reality. At first glance, this tale sounds unrealistic and irrational, but upon deeper inspection, is there any aspect of this story that could not occur in our sense of reality? There are many nonfiction stories that have very similar depictions; the only difference is the narrative. Poe writes from the perspective of a man who is not sane, which is the only barrier stopping readers from making the distinction that his story is based on reality.

The thought that a sequence like “The Tell-Tale Heart” could and has happened in our world bound by natural laws is a much more terrifying idea than a scary tale written in a world with a loss of natural laws that contains a supernatural aspect. Although Poe does not conform to our original thoughts on how he fits into weird fiction and cosmic horror, in a way, the aspect of rationality makes his texts and The Tell-Tale Heart ultimately more unsettling, and I believe he intends this due to his deep psychological understanding of human terror. When reading a terrorizing story or viewing another type of horrifying media that contains supernaturalism, I agree with Cisco that it is not the actual being that is terrifying, but the imagination of that being crossing over their boundaries of reality into ours. The idea that if this were to occur in a universe where we also coexist is much more thrilling. That is exactly what Poe and the Uncanny do. These texts contain a phenomenon that we almost force to fit within the box of the supernatural because knowing that this could happen within our realm of existence is significantly more terrifying. We may never know whether Poe meant to horrify us by using our own reality as a form of torment, but if he did, his psychology of terror would have been much more innovative for his time and deeper than I would have ever imagined.

## **7. Conclusion**

Through reading “The Tell-Tale Heart” with consideration of the historical context of psychological classifications and texts, we can interpret the instances that occur within the story as being mental illness. Historicizing the psychological dimensions of weird fiction reveals the true nature of its supernatural aspects. This conclusion generates the question of what other weird fiction texts could be determined as having psychological explanations when put into historical context and compared to psychological texts. This question could even be extended to other genres that share the same supernatural aspects, such as Gothic texts and Romantic literature. Interpretation of whether other texts in weird fiction and beyond are representations of mental illness would provide further insights into how these psychological disorders were viewed and treated in society.

These findings could even have further implications in terms of current beliefs and stigmas regarding mental illness. Similar to other social issues, the first important step in overcoming current injustices is to consider the historical contexts and interpretations surrounding the issue. In order to truly understand mental illness and the stigma surrounding these disorders, we need to understand how these viewpoints came to fruition. This allows us to start working towards change regarding contemporary ideas and representations of psychological disorders. Working with and analyzing these past texts could be the birth of real progress in combating the unjust and negative judgments that society holds regarding those with mental disorders.

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