

Rationalizing the Irrational: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of The Tell-Tale Heart

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of psychoanalysis particularly psycholinguistics in the investigation of crimes on the crime scenes by using data from the short story The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allen Poe. Psycholinguistics as methodology establishes the link between the production of language and the underlying cognitive processes (Harely, 2005, p. 13) and Poe's short story presents the best example to comprehend how some specific linguistic clues help to know the real cognitive processes under work. Psychology deals with the facts determining human phenomena and language is one of these phenomena. The protagonist of The Tell-Tale Heart is a victim of social isolation. He lives in complete isolation that has exerted a negative influence on his personality. In a fit of madness, he kills an old man in the dead hours of night just because one of his eyes resembles that of a vulture-a pale blue eye. He tries to create logic not only in the act of killing but also in the process of killing. Police arrive to investigate and the young man finally admits his crime. The psycholinguistic analysis of the language and actions used by the young man and the killer before and after the murder helps in finding out the crime of the murderer. The paper concludes that psycholinguistics can be the best tool in the investigation of crimes on the crime scene.

Keywords: Psycholinguistics, crimes, cognitive processes, human phenomenon, a pale blue eye

Introduction

The present study is a psycholinguistic analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's short story Tell Tale Heart. In recent years Psycholinguistics has helped a lot in determining not only the nature of crime but also the very motives behind these

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crimes. It explores the cognitive processes that enable a person to utter and understand specific linguistic items at specific events. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1936-1950) that humans create their own understanding of the world particularly helps in investigating the motives behind the crimes. His theory also suggested that intelligence changes over the years which further implies that normal humans at some stage of their life may behave quite differently as compared to their earlier behaviors. There are few artists who have penned on the psychology of crime in English literature and Poe stands supreme among them. His short stories are a beautiful blend of the study of human psychology, human behaviors and human logic.

These stories also marvel in the theory of unity of effect. Often these short stories highlight an unnamed narrator who very logically describes his illogical behavior. He takes his strongest support from the language in which he narrates his actions to his readers. Crimes are not unusual in short stories. The genre of scientific fiction is replete with violence, murders, killings and tortures. Mostly these signs of cruelty are justified by the characters in the stories. They can be the result of some wrong doing on the part of some villain e.g. robbery, theft etc. In response to such illegal actions, there necessarily appears a strong man who puts the things in right order by the rule of tit for tat.

The readers seldom come to know about the secret psychology of either the wrong doers, the murders or the rescuers in the narratives. Psycholinguistics helps a lot in knowing the secret working of the human mind behind such crimes. Adler (1927) identified two major tendencies that are dominant in psychological life: the person's social feelings and the striving of the person for power and domination. Every activity and every attitude are influenced by these as a person strives to achieve security and to fulfill life's three main challenges, life, work and society. Adler theorized that a major human motive was will to power (the striving to feel strong and powerful in interacting with the world). One wants to avoid feeling of weakness or inferiority

Theoretical Framework

Psycholinguistics is the interlinked study of both language and psychology. Ever since Jacob Kanter coined the term psycholinguistics (1936), it has increasingly been catching the attention of scientific and social disciplines. 'Language must be studied

both as actual psychological happenings and as social and historical phenomena' (Kantor, 1936, p. 56). Mental operations which are manifested through language and actions can only be analyzed by a close analysis of language. Mental actions do not take place on the occasion of their actual manifestations, rather they had taken place in the mind long before they are committed outwardly. There can be a considerable time lapse between an action in the mind and its actual manifestation on the world plane. A greater time lapse increases a person's obsession towards it.

So, actions on the world plane take an analyst back into the deep psychological workings of a person to know the cognitive process behind some action. Such psychological probing always proves fruitful in detecting the crimes of criminals. Psycholinguistics is the study of relationship between linguistics factors and the underlying cognitive processes. Mentalistic theories of Jean Piaget (1923) and Rudolf Carnap (1934) advocated that language must be learned while the later schools of thought like B.F. Skinner believed that language was a behavior. Psycholinguistics emerged as reaction to Chomskyan views on language acquisition. Noam Chomsky, as reaction to Skinner's theory (1959) who believed that language was a necessarily learned behavior, held that humans possessed an innate ability to comprehend and produce language.

He distinguished between 'competence' and 'performance' in the use of language. He defines 'competence' as 'the ideal speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language' and the 'performance' as 'as the actual use of language in concrete situation' (1972). Language, according to him was not a human behavior. He held that human ability to acquire, comprehend and use language was different from animal communication. This difference between human language and animal language may be because of favourable gene mutation or from an adaptation of skills evolved for other purposes (Anderson, 1988).

Review of the Literature

Poe revolutionized the genre of short story writing with his theory of 'unity of effect' which according to him could only be achieved by detailed planning of the plot of the story. Moreover, calculated attention to these details was also equally necessary. He believed that in order to achieve a unified whole in the story, the writer must pre-mediate all the actions and details before joining them to form a complete

narrative. Finally, there must not be single word in the whole composition that does not contribute to the pre-mediated designs of the writer.

Poe can certainly be called the inventor of scientific horror fiction. Horror, morbidity, terror and some abnormality are some of the prominent features of his short stories, however there is certainly some human logic behind the horrified actions of his characters which they successfully justify. These short stories provide good linguistic plain to understand the deep human psyche. Many of the main characters in these stories try to rationalize their irrational attitude. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) is a work of Gothic fiction.

Apparently, madness, isolation and unearthly atmosphere dominate the actions in the story but the underlying theme of the story edge on the entangled human psyche that has the ability to create and justify its irrationality in language. An unnamed narrator reaches at Roderick Usher's house on a 'dull, dark and soundless day' (Poe, 1839) to attend him in his illness. The inside setting of the house is also gloomy and mysterious. The narrator also notices that the dead trees and murky ponds around the house have cast a diseased and evil shadow on the house. Roderick is pale and seems afraid of his own house. On his arrival in this claustrophobic atmosphere, the narrator finds that Roderick's sister Madeline is also ill from a mysterious disease.

The inescapable effect of the house mysteriously traps the narrator and he is completely unable to leave the house until it falls. It seems that the evil in the house has controlled the fate of its people. In an attempt to cheer the soul of his diseased friend the narrator himself falls into the cruel clutches of fate symbolized by the inner and outer barren landscape of the house. One day Roderick hysterically knocks at the door of the narrator's room to show the latter some mysterious gas surrounding the house. The narrator in order to brighten the terrified soul of his friend reads him a medieval romance 'Mad Trist'.

Suddenly he hears noises that match the descriptions in the story. Roderick says that he had been listening to these sounds for many days. He now believes that his sister whom they had buried alive was making these sounds. The wind opened the door Madeline was standing outside it. She attacks her brother as she was dying who also dies of fear. The horrified narrator flees from the house which also crumbles behind him. Such is the fate of the inhabitants of this house. The events, situations

and the characters may seem abnormal and edging on madness but they move logically.

The Black Cat (1845) by Poe is another short story of abnormal human behavior of the narrator which he logically relates to his readers. Poe proves through his short stories that abnormal human behaviors have strong psychological roots. A narrative of death, murder and violence, The Black Cat is replete with essential human emotions which, the story proves, are not always positive and life supporting. A large part of human psyche dwells in hatred, jealousy and sometimes abnormal and mad behavior.

However, Poe tries to prove that such mysterious human psyche can in no way be denied, it is very much the part and parcel of human actions. The unnamed narrator in the story kills his cat Pluto, his 'favourite pet and playmate' (Poe, 1843). He asserts that the cat always 'attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets' (Poe, 1843). It is certain that nobody can kill a pet like this black cat especially when there is such a tender bond of love between the owner and the pet. That is why the narrator takes pain to describe how his mental health deteriorated during the past few days after which he killed not only his favourite cat but also his wife and another cat. After killing his first cat, the narrator found another similar cat though the later had a distinct mark on its fur. With the passage of time he noticed that this mark resembled 'gallows'. Tortured by the fury of repercussions, the narrator could not get rid of the ominous feelings which this evil mark on the animal's fur gave him.

This is now the narrator's sense of sinning instead of the actual act of sinning that is tormenting him and will lead him commit more crimes in future. Poe's narrative art excels in justifying the seemingly irrational attitude of his characters. He seems implying that man needs to experience the best and worst sides of his nature. There is nothing unusual in showing the best side of human nature and which in return is highly digestible in popular narratives, however the justification and rationalization of the worst side of human nature is the special feature of Poe's narrative art.

Methodology

The present study is a psycholinguistic analysis of The Tell-Tale Heart by using Sigmund Freud's concept of defense mechanisms. People use different defense

mechanisms in order to avoid negative feelings like anxiety, inferiority and some threats etc. Anna Freud in her work 'The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence' (1936) lists ten different defense mechanisms including 'isolation'. People defend themselves against dangers by mentally isolating themselves. Whenever they face some alarming information against themselves, they try to produce happy, spontaneous and normal response to lessen the impact of this alarming information. Sometimes they are successful and at other times they may be complete failure. In either case language provides a powerful medium to judge the inner workings of their minds. Human beings are active workers who act on the instructions of their brains and brains possess diverse psychological messages.

Human psychology has the knack of transforming brain's messages into human actions and language as manifestation of these actions is a major human phenomenon to study human cognitive process in order to reach at some conclusions. Defence mechanisms in Psycholinguistics as methodology help in analyzing the inner working of human minds. In recent years its application has particularly been useful in the investigation of crimes. In the present study the psychology of language which the protagonist uses as defense mechanism on the crime scene has been studied in order to find out the crime. He commits a vulture like act by killing an old man.

Textual Analysis

The main interest of the story lies in the fact that Poe has been effectively successful in creating an atmosphere which is at once convincing though the situation, the idea and the very act of killing is totally absurd. One may not always like the eyes, noses or ears of the people around him. This is also reality that people normally do not go on killing others just because they dislike the facial parts of other people.

However, Poe's protagonist does it in a very careful and organized manner. He seems perfectly at ease and enjoys the act of killing. Poe's narratives are often marked with strong, precise, calculated and vivid psychological effect which they exert on the minds of the readers. A short story, he believed must focus on a single event and single character, only then the unity of effect could be achieved which he always stressed in his work. In the Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe effectively creates an atmosphere of suspense and horror which is at once convincing and absurd. A schizophrenic young man in the dead hours of night kills an old man for

nothing. He felt that one of old man's blue eyes resembled that of a vulture's eyes. The sight of old man's eye created feelings of hatred in the young man and he thought of getting rid of the eye. Whenever he looked at the old man's eye his blood rushed madly in his veins. So, he decides to remove the vulture like eye of the old man. This could be possible only if he killed the old man. He carefully plans to materialize his thought. For seven days he practiced of entering into the old man's room without awaking him. The manner with which he practiced this mysterious act is very strange. Only some extremely smart and clever person can do it and the protagonist painstakingly attempts to prove that he was not mad during the whole of his attitude towards the old man. He was particularly polite and civil with the old man in these seven days. His seven days' practice of thrusting his head into the old man's room very cautiously, throwing just one ray of light on his eye which infuriated him and later on killing the old man very skillfully is flawless and thus convincing to the readers.

Though the idea of the story seems extremely pointless, yet the whole planning and the process of the action is simply logical and keeps the readers engaging throughout the whole of the dramatic action. The reason of killing the old man can in no way be justified. He had no enmity towards the old man. The later had never been unkind towards him. He was not vicious, criminal or troublesome fellow. Both of them had good relations between themselves. The young man had no desire for the old man's wealth. It was only the blue eye which maddened him and he decided to get rid of it. It is painful that darkness prevails during the whole of the action in the story. There is no light except the ray of the lantern which he throws on the old man's eye. Such darkness has always been inviting evil deeds in the tragedies of literature.

*Tis now the very witching time of night
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the bitter day
Would quake to look on (3.2.361-365)*

However, there is a marked difference between Hamlet and the protagonist of The Tell Tale-Heart. Whereas Hamlet in no way can muster up courage to kill King Claudius, Poe's Mephistophelian protagonist certainly has the courage and ability to take the life of an innocent old man. And here lies the mastery of Poe. He certainly

is the only one who can rationalize the most irrational behavior of his characters. The protagonist cut off the parts of the dead body of the old man and buried them under the floor, but just then he heard a knocking at the door. He opened the door and three policemen entered the house. The protagonist seemed quite confident. The policemen had heard the shrieks of the old man and had come to investigate into the matter. The protagonist attempts to use defense mechanism by isolating himself from the whole incident. He tries to assure them that nothing has happened and the old man was out of the city. He very confidently showed them the paraphernalia of the old man, but unconsciously led them to the room where he had disposed off the corps of the old man. He brought three chairs for the policemen and he himself sat on the very spot of the corpse. Apparently the three policemen seemed quite satisfied at whatever the killer had told them but inwardly they were psychologically manipulating the killer. That is why they did not leave his house after completing their search into the house. They sat on the chairs and began to talk of familiar and everyday conversation.

However, the protagonist began to distract and wished them gone. His head ached and he felt a ringing in his ears which became more and more distinct. He began to talk more fluently in order to get rid of this feeling. The final description of the protagonist in this state of derision is a very helpful platform for the psychoanalysis of the criminals. It is a state in which most of the criminals accept their crimes. It is interesting to analyze how the protagonist just like Dr. Faustus passes from a state of pure enjoyment into a state of agony which ultimately will bring punishment to the both. The three psychoanalysts-policemen do not respond to the protagonist's abnormal actions, rather they go on talking about familiar everyday matters. Meanwhile the killer 'paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men-but the noise steadily increased' (Poe, 1843).

However, the noise did not stop and the three policemen smiled at him. His fury increased to the point where he foamed, raved and swore. In his last attempt to stop the noise he swung the chair upon which he was sitting and grated it upon the boards but the noise went even louder. And the policemen chatted pleasantly and continued smiling at him. They knew that the killer was now on the verge of admitting his crime. Their strategy worked and the killer's fury entered into a state of agony where he could bear anything save this agony. His final state of mind makes him implore like Faustus's last cry for salvation. The killer also finally feels that his inner turmoil will cease only if he admits his crime. The most important factor

during the killer's fit of madness is the calm and cool attitude of the policemen. They are just waiting for the moment the protagonist himself admits the murder. On the other hand, the agony inside and the policemen's response outside trigger the killer to further madness. 'Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no more' (Poe, 1843). Finally, the policemen succeed and the killer cries "Villains! dissemble no more! I admit the deed" (Poe, 1843).

Conclusion

The paper finds that psychoanalysis particularly psycholinguistics of the criminal at the crime scene is a very helpful technique to explore the crimes in general. It particularly works in investigating those crimes where the criminal is very skillful with no crime history. The study finds that the psychological maneuvering enables the investigators to reject the old and traditional techniques of crime probing and adopt modern psychological techniques in their place. The three policemen very cleverly do not leave the killer's home even after the killer satisfies them. They do not ask him anything, do not touch him and do not even search the house. They sit comfortably on the chairs and talk about ordinary and everyday matters. However, their very presence and their calm and cool behavior instigate the protagonist to act abnormally. His defense mechanism fails and he admits his crime.

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