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**Unreliable Narration in Edgar Allan Poe's
"The Tell-Tale Heart"**

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Dedication

To the light of my life,

to the quiet strength behind every word I wrote,

I dedicate this humble work to those who stood by me every step of the way, always there with love and support that never faded.

To my father, whose steady presence and encouragement gave me strength even when I doubted myself.

To my mother, whose warmth and kindness made every challenge feel manageable.

To my brothers, Adel and Imad, for their support, thoughtful gestures, and constant belief in me.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the literary technique of unreliable narration and its function within the genre of psychological horror, with a particular focus on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". It investigates how unreliable narration distorts the reader's perception of truth, challenges narrative authority, and intensifies the experience of horror. The research is grounded in both rhetorical and cognitive approaches to narrative theory, drawing on key contributions from Wayne C. Booth, James Phelan, Ansgar Nünning, and Bruno Zerweck. The study begins by outlining major theoretical models, including Booth's concept of the implied author and Phelan's axes of unreliability, as well as Nünning's and Zerweck's cognitive frameworks, which emphasise the reader's role in detecting unreliability. It then applies these theories in a detailed analysis of "The Tell-Tale Heart", identifying the textual, psychological, and structural indicators of the narrator's unreliability. By examining the intersections of madness, manipulation, and narrative form, the dissertation argues that both rhetorical and cognitive perspectives are essential to fully understand the story's impact. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that unreliable narration in psychological horror does more than simply mislead the reader. It constructs a complex emotional and interpretive experience, where fear arises not only from events within the plot but from the unstable mind through which the story is filtered.

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General Introduction

Unreliable narration is one of the most interesting and powerful techniques in storytelling. It gives a version of events to the reader, filtered through a narrator whose credibility is questionable. This lack of trust can result from various factors, such as mental illness, personal bias, lack of knowledge, or even a desire to deceive. When a narrator is unreliable, the reader is encouraged to think more deeply about what is being told and to question every part of the narrative. This technique transforms reading into an active process, where the reader is not simply receiving the story, but working to uncover the truth behind it. Because of this, unreliable narration plays a key role in modern literature and has become a major subject in narrative theory and literary criticism.

This dissertation focuses on how unreliable narration functions, especially in psychological horror fiction. The main research questions, therefore, are

- How does unreliable narration function as a narrative strategy?
- How does it affect the reader's understanding of the story, especially when the narrator shows signs of psychological instability?
- What are the most prominent signs of such unreliability in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"?

The choice fell upon Edgar Allan Poe's short story because it clearly illustrates how a narrator's madness and obsession can distort reality, manipulate emotions, and challenge the reader's perception of truth. The study makes use of a textual analysis of the story to attain its

objectives that basically seek to provide a clear and deep understanding of unreliable narration, how it works, how it affects readers, and how it creates meaning.

The project began with a personal interest: after reading “The Yellow Wallpaper”, I became fascinated with characters whose minds seem unstable. At the time, I did not yet know the term “unreliable narration”, but I kept wondering whether the narrator was mentally ill, or if the people around her were the problem. I found myself asking questions, trying to figure everything out. Later, I discovered that what I had been trying to understand was part of a larger literary concept: unreliable narration. From that moment on, I felt strongly drawn to the topic and wanted to explore it further, especially in the context of psychological fiction, where the human mind becomes the source of horror.

The dissertation is divided into two main chapters. Chapter One introduces the concept of unreliable narration and presents the major theories that define it. It begins the rhetorical model, followed by the cognitive model, and finally it compares both to highlight their strengths and limitations. The chapter also discusses different types of unreliable narrators, focusing on William Riggan’s classification, which includes the madman, the naïve, the clown, and the picaro. It further examines how unreliability shapes narrative meaning and affects the reader’s emotional and intellectual engagement. Special attention is given to the role of unreliable narration in psychological horror and stories of madness.

Chapter Two provides a close reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” It begins with a brief biography of Edgar Allan Poe, showing how his troubled life and emotional struggles influenced his writing. Then, a short summary of the story follows, setting the stage for an analysis of the narrator’s unreliability based on three categories: false cues, the psychological profile of the

narrator, and stylistic and structural markers of unreliability. The analysis aims to show how Poe creates a narrator who both frightens and confuses the reader. Finally, the chapter discusses whether the narrator's unreliability is best explained through a rhetorical lens, understood as a tool of manipulation, or through a cognitive lens, which views it as a sign of mental disintegration.

In the end, this dissertation tries to clarify how unreliable narration operates, both as a literary technique and as a psychological experience. By studying this concept in depth and applying it to a powerful short story like "The Tell-Tale Heart", the goal is to understand how stories use unreliable voices to challenge truth, create suspense, and draw the reader into the mind of someone who may not see the world clearly, yet still demands to be heard.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Perspectives on Unreliable Narration

1.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a thorough study of unreliable narration, tracing its definitions and the different ways it has been theorized. It focuses on two main approaches, rhetorical and cognitive, providing an overview of each and examining the contributions of key scholars. A brief comparison of these two perspectives follows, leading to a discussion of the major types of unreliable narrators. The chapter then considers the narrative significance of unreliability, especially in terms of how it shapes meaning and influences interpretation. Finally, it explores how unreliable narration functions within psychological horror and literary representations of madness.

1.2 Definition of Unreliable Narration

Wayne C. Booth was the first to introduce the concept of unreliable narration in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), presenting it as a narrative technique in which the narrator's credibility is compromised, resulting in a distorted representation of events. This lack of reliability prevents the narrator from accurately conveying the true events of the story. Building on this concept, Booth introduces another key term to the vocabulary of narrative discourse: "the implied author", which distinguishes between the narrative voice and the deeper meaning of the text. As Booth states: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and unreliable when he does not" (158).

In line with this idea, Seymour Chatman highlights the importance of "reading between the lines" (233), urging readers to distinguish between what is objectively true and what is merely the narrator's perception. In fact, Chatman describes this act of "reading out" or "reading between the lines" as a kind of "secret communication" (233) between the implied author and the implied reader. Through these subtle narrative cues, the reader may be able to piece together the narrator's inconsistencies, contradictions, or shifts in tone.

However, some scholars challenge this traditional view, arguing that the notion of the implied author is too ambiguous. Ansgar Nünning, for instance, argues that relying solely on fixed notions of the implied author to determine the narrator's unreliability makes the concept of unreliable narration "terminologically imprecise and theoretically inadequate" (30).

Instead, he challenges these established approaches and shifts the focus from textual norms to reader interpretation. He argues that unreliable narration is not an inherent textual feature but a cognitive process. In this view, the perception of unreliability depends on how readers interpret inconsistencies and ambiguities within the text, aligning with cognitive narratology's emphasis on the reader's active role in constructing meaning (Nünning 30).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

In the study of unreliable narration, two major theoretical lenses offer distinct yet complementary insights: the rhetorical and the cognitive. Each framework approaches the phenomenon from a different angle, one emphasising the communicative act between narrator, author, and reader, and the other highlighting the reader's interpretive process. The rhetorical model, shaped by figures such as Wayne C. Booth and James Phelan, examines how authors strategically use narration to guide, manipulate, or estrange the reader. In contrast, the cognitive model, advanced by Ansgar Nünning and Bruno Zerweck, shifts the focus toward the reader's mental schemas, arguing that unreliability emerges through the interpretive process. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding how unreliable narration functions both within the text and in the reader's mind. The following sections will explore each lens in detail, tracing their key concepts, developments, and applications.

1.3.1 Rhetorical Approach to Unreliable Narration

Literature serves as a powerful means of communication, where writers convey emotions, ideas, and interpretations, inviting readers to experience the story in a more immersive and meaningful way. This process, in turn, is built upon an unavoidable aspect: the rhetorical approach that the author cannot ignore (Booth 149). It treats narration not merely as a storytelling device, but as an interactive act involving four key participants: the narrator, the implied author, the character, and the reader (Booth 155). It offers strategies to construct meaning, influence perception, and engage the audience, through a combination of language, narrative techniques and narrative structure.

Over time, the rhetorical approach has become particularly significant in cases of unreliable narration, where the narrator's perspective contradicts either the values and norms of the text or those of the reader, creating a gap that challenges the reader's perception of truth (Nünning 87). This approach provides a way to determine whether the narrator is trustworthy, deceptive, or only misguided.

Wayne C. Booth was one of the first scholars to examine this concept through a rhetorical lens, framing it as a deliberate narrative strategy that authors use to challenge the readers' interpretations. Building on Booth's work, several scholars have been inspired to refine the concept of unreliable narration while also exploring its nuances and examining the rhetorical strategies used to shape narrative perspective and reader response.

1.3.1.1 Booth's Contribution: The Implied Author and The Reader Manipulation

While the rhetorical approach has evolved over time, one of the most influential scholars in this area is Wayne C. Booth. In his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he introduced ideas that continue to shape our understanding of narration today. One of his most enduring contributions is the

concept of the implied author, a term that he coined, and he believed that it is essential for understanding unreliable narrators.

The implied author is not the real person who wrote the book, nor the narrator who tells the story. Instead, it is a kind of “hidden author”, constructed by the narrative itself. This figure is the one responsible for shaping the story, choosing what to show, and deciding how events should be told.

Also, this version of the story is never directly present in the text, yet it becomes visible through the structure, perspective and tone of the narrative. This invisible figure has a special role. It guides the reader’s trust. In fact, Booth says that “the most important distance” in fiction is the one between the unreliable narrator and the implied author (Booth 158). This distance helps to understand when a narrator is not telling the full truth, and it also allows one to see that someone else, namely the implied author, is inviting readers or “carrying the reader” to judge the narrator and look deeper into the story.

When talking about narrative authority, it is often assumed that omniscient narrators know everything. However, this is not always the case. In fact, even so-called omniscient narrators are often limited in what they can show or know. According to Booth, there are many types of narrative privilege that is to say, the kind of access a narrator has to the events, characters, or inner thoughts within the story (Booth 160). Some narrators seem to know more than others, but they are still shaped and controlled by the implied author who always remains the one with full knowledge.

As Booth writes:

“The implied author demands our absolute faith in his powers of divination. We must never for a moment doubt that he knows everything about each of these sixteen minds or that he has chosen correctly how much to show of each.”(161)

In that sense, even the most powerful narrators are still narrative creations. They do not speak with their own authority, but with the authority granted to them by the implied author. For example, in *Tom Jones*, the narrator sometimes pretends not to know how to tell the story and even asks the Muses for help. This kind of limitation is playful, but it still reminds the reader that the narrator is performing a role.

Another example is Ishmael in *Moby Dick*. Most of the time, he speaks as a realistic and limited first-person narrator, but occasionally, he breaks through those limits and seems to know things no human narrator could know. These moments suggest that even realistic narrators may have variable knowledge, depending on narrative necessity. In all of these cases, the implied author is the one deciding when to limit or expand the narrator's vision.

This kind of control becomes even more important in modern fiction. Take *Lolita* for instance. Humbert Humbert presents himself as intelligent, honest, and in control, but the reader quickly notices gaps and contradictions in his story. He appears confident, but his reliability is deeply questionable.

Similarly, in *Gone Girl*, both Nick and Amy take turns narrating the story, but each one hides important truths. Their voices seem powerful, but in the end, it is the implied author who guides the reader's judgment through tone, structure, and the deliberate revelation or concealment of key details.

These examples show that omniscience in narration is not the same as absolute knowledge. Narrators, no matter how powerful they may seem, are limited in different ways by their roles, their personalities, or their positions in the story. What remains constant is that the implied author stands behind them, choosing what kind of privilege to give, and how much knowledge to allow.

On top of that, the implied author controls not only the narrator but also the reader, and this works by creating a gap between what the narrator perceives and what the reader understands. To

put it simply, this gap is the key to manipulating the reader's interpretation and guiding their emotional response and judgment. It also crafts the narrative in a way that shapes the reader's trust in the narrator, and sometimes leads them down paths of deception and confusion.

For instance, the narrator in *Lolita* presents himself as reliable but the implied author subtly exposes contradictions in his story, this compels readers to question the credibility of the events. Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator's perspective is limited by his own emotional repression, but the implied author strategically reveals the truth to the reader, creating a gradual revelation that reshapes the reader's understanding of the character's motivations and the broader narrative.

All in all, the implied author is able to guide the reader through the story, controlling their emotional engagement and their interpretation of the narrator's actions.

1.3.1.2 Phelan's Refinement of Rhetorical Unreliability

In revisiting Booth's concept of the implied author James Phelan offers a refined rhetorical understanding of unreliable narration. He argues that character narration functions as a form of indirect communication between the implied author and the real reader. More specifically, a narrative voice is never just a character telling a story; rather, it is a constructed voice shaped by the implied author to address an audience beyond the text (Phelan 9).

Additionally, Phelan points out that there are always two layers of communication taking place: the narrator addresses someone within the story world, while the implied author communicates with the actual reader (9).

What's more, at one end of this range, Phelan introduces what he calls "mask narration," in which the implied author speaks through the narrator and fully supports their perspective. In such

cases, the narrator's voice becomes a rhetorical tool that enhances the persuasiveness of the narrative (Phelan 10).

While Wayne C. Booth originally described unreliable narration in terms of a narrator being truthful or not about facts and values, Phelan goes further. He introduces what he calls "axes of unreliability". These include the axis of events which replaces Booth's term "facts", the axis of ethics, which corresponds to values, and a third, new category: the axis of knowledge and perception" (Phelan 33–34).

Phelan observes that Booth's model "does not adequately explain their inference" (34). In other words, he believes that Booth's method sometimes fails to capture how and why a narrator may be unreliable. According to Booth, the process involves four main steps: identifying evidence of unreliability, naming its type, (either related to facts or values), linking it to the narrator's personality, and finally, reflecting on the relationship between author, narrator, and reader (34). However, Phelan argues that the second and third steps do not always apply smoothly. Not every instance of unreliability, he explains, fits easily into the categories Booth outlines and the connection between the narrator's personality and the type of unreliability may not always be obvious or helpful. Due to these limitations, Phelan suggests that Booth's model is not always effective and does not always fit with what is really happening in the story.

Phelan uses an example about the narrator from *The Remains of The Day*, Stevens who talks about his interest in Miss Kenton's marriage, claiming it was for professional reasons, but the reader understands that it was for something more personal (Phelan 34). This means that the narrator is hiding the truth even from himself. From this, Phelan introduces two important concepts: underreporting and under-reading. By "underreporting", it means that Stevens does not admit to his "narratee" what both he and the authorial audience know about his personal interest, and by

“under-reading”, it means that he does not consciously know or at least is not able to admit to himself what is assumed about his personal interest (Phelan 34).

Ultimately, If Stevens is underreporting, he knows the truth but hides it, so the unreliability fits within the axis of ethics. But if he is under-reading, he is unaware of the truth. In this case, the unreliability is not about facts or ethics, but about perception. This is what Phelan calls “the axis of knowledge and perception”. If he is under-reading, then the unreliability exists along neither the axis of ethics nor the axis of events but the axis of knowledge and perception (Phelan 34).

Moreover, Phelan believes that not every unreliable narrator makes the reader feel the same way; some of the narrators draw readers into sympathising with them while others push readers away. He focuses on two specific types called “estranging unreliability” and “bonding unreliability”.

Phelan emphasises that in estranging unreliability, there is a wide gap between the narrator’s interpretations and the authorial audience’s understanding, as a result, readers feel distant from the narrator’s point of view. That is to say, there is a disconnect between how the narrator sees events and how the implied author intends them to be seen.

Also, he adds that in estranging unreliability, the authorial audience recognises that taking on the narrator’s perspective would move them further away from the implied author’s stance. This shift would, in effect, harm the relationship between author and reader, resulting what Phelan calls a “net loss”

A good example of this, he suggests, is found in Lardner’s character Whitey. When Whitey claims that Jim Kendall was “kind of rough, but a good fella at heart,” he is, as Phelan puts it, “misreading and misregarding” (11). The audience, meanwhile, forms a much more critical judgment of Jim. As a result, they begin to distance themselves ethically and interpretively from Whitey himself.

On the other hand, “bonding unreliability”, and as Phelan states, it brings the narrator and the reader together ethically, emotionally and interpretively. He claims that the effect is “paradoxical” and so, instead of increasing the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, the unreliability actually reduces it (11). In simple words, the idea is that even though the narrator’s perspective is flawed, there are moments in their interpretation or judgment that align with the implied author’s values. The audience, then, despite the narrator’s limitations, they recognise the growth and sincerity of the narrator, which fosters the connection.

For instance, in the book, *The Remains of The Day*, Stevens writes near the end of the novel that “in bantering lies the key to human warmth.” According to Phelan, this is an example of underregarding. Stevens fails to realise that warmth involves much more than casual banter (Phelan 11). However, the moment is still meaningful. It signals that Stevens has learned something important over time, and so, the audience responds by moving toward him, not only in terms of ethical judgment but also in terms of emotional connection. Therefore, even in his unreliability, Stevens becomes a more sympathetic figure.

To sum up, Phelan shifts the focus away from the narrator’s accuracy alone to the relationship between the narrator and the reader, and he examines how the reader reacts to the narrator’s voice and perspective. With the axes of events, ethics, and knowledge, Phelan makes room for more nuance in the analysis of where unreliability happens and how. His distinction between bonding and estranging unreliability highlights how the emotional and interpretive facets of a narration affect who is able to draw close to a narrator and who will remain out of his reach. These refinements deepen our rhetorical understanding of how unreliability functions as a tool of narrative communication.

1.3.2 The Cognitive Approach to Unreliable Narration

Unreliable Narration has traditionally been defined through a rhetorical view, often relying on the concept of the implied author. However, Ansgar Nünning, the first to propose a cognitive perspective on unreliable narration, challenges this view. He argues that “the implied author” itself is an ill-defined and paradoxical concept (Nünning 33–34). This criticism opens the way for a cognitive approach, which shifts the focus from authorial intention to how readers recognise and process narrative unreliability.

Nünning explains that unreliable narration should not be defined purely by the text’s structure or language but by “the conceptual frameworks that readers bring to the text” (39–40). Unlike the rhetorical approach which emphasises communication between the narrator, the implied author, and the reader, the cognitive approach focuses on the reader's active role in detecting unreliability (Nünning 39).

Expanding the cognitive perspective further, David Herman explores how human cognitive structures influence the understanding of narratives. He argues that the logic behind a story, which refers to how events and actions are connected and make sense within the narrative, is part of basic human cognitive abilities (86).

In other words, narratives or stories follow certain patterns that readers recognise. These patterns help make sense of what is really happening in a story. In short, narratives and readers’ cognitive processes are closely connected. This connection shows that understanding a story depends not only on the text itself but also on how readers mentally organise and interpret the events. Also, readers do not approach stories with empty minds, instead they use pre-existing mental structures called “scripts” to fill in missing details and organise the events they read about (Herman 97).

An example provided by Herman is when reading about a birthday party, readers automatically expect presents, cake, and guests, even if the story does not describe every detail. To put it simply, when the text gives very little information, these mental scripts allow readers to recognise the structure of the narrative.

According to Nünning, the narrator's unreliability is not always about the distance between their values and those of the implied author. Instead, what matters more is how far their way of thinking is from the reader's or critic's own idea of what is normal or acceptable (40–41). In other words, a narrator may be considered unreliable not because they contradict the implied author, but because their behavior goes against what the critic sees as “normal moral standards” and “common sense” (Nünning 43).

1.3.2.1 Bruno Zerweck and Reader-Based Detection of Unreliability

The study of unreliable narration has gradually shifted away from the rhetorical approach, which relies heavily on the implied author as the narrative guide, toward a more reader-centered and a cognitive perspective. Bruno Zerweck is one of the scholars who strongly supports this shift. In fact, he adopts and expands Ansgar Nünning's theory, explaining that unreliable narration can be seen as “a projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator's unreliability” (Zerweck 151).

Consequently, he defines it as “an interpretive strategy or cognitive process of the sort that has come to be known as “naturalization”, a term borrowed from Monika Fludernik, which describes how readers mentally adjust the narrative to make it coherent (Zerweck 151). He explains that readers use mental “schemata” from real life and literary experience to make sense of texts.

These frameworks help readers decide when a narrator is unreliable by mentally comparing the story to what “makes sense” (Zerweck 153, qtd. Fludernik). To put it simply, unreliability is not just in the text; instead it is projected by the reader during the interpretation.

Bruno Zerweck does not fully deny the idea that the text gives some clues about unreliability, but he believes that the reader plays the larger role. As he explains through Harker’s concept “the interactive reading process”, which says that unreliability depends upon both sensorially perceived information located in the text and extra-textual conceptual information located in the reader’s mind” (153). This means that the reader uses their own knowledge, experience, and thinking to decide if the narrator is unreliable.

Also, the story might have strange or confusing parts, but the reader is the one who makes sense of them. Zerweck believes that readers do not just follow what the author wants them to think; rather, they actively work out the meaning using their own mind.

Unreliable narration has been defined in many different ways over time, and it has even been connected to other fields like ethics, language, and real-life communication. However, it was mostly overlooked by structuralists until Ansgar Nünning introduced a cognitive approach in the 1990s (Zerweck 216). Building on his foundation, Zerweck not only supported the theory but also expanded it by introducing a historical dimension.

Zerweck argues that unreliability is not something fixed but rather evolves with literary and cultural shifts. As he explains it “is subject to historical transformation: as a fictive act mediating between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’, it has developed along historical lines depending on changing cultural contexts” (Zerweck 223). In other words, the reader’s interpretation of text through cultural and cognitive frames shapes how unreliable narration is understood.

In addition, Zerweck presents four theses that show how the idea of unreliable narration has developed. The first one links real-life situations to the way unreliable narration causes cognitive disruption (225). The second explains that unreliable narration became more common in the twentieth century because stories started targeting the reader's mind by using doubt, mental pressure, and inner conflict as tools (226). The third shifts to the emotional level, and that the reader's feelings are being manipulated by the unreliable narrators, this creates a complex relationship between trust and suspicion (230). As for the fourth one, Zerweck argues that writers began to challenge the traditional forms of narration, and opt for more self-aware and experimental ones (231).

To sum up, Zerweck's contribution to the cognitive approach shows that unreliable narration depends largely on the reader's role in making sense of the story. His work as well adds new dimensions to the cognitive approach by connecting it to interpretation and literary change.

1.3.3 Comparison between rhetorical and cognitive approaches

Now, both the rhetorical and cognitive approaches try to explain the same thing and how unreliable narration actually works in a story. But they do not go in the same way. In this case, this difference is the point, they diverge in their understanding of where unreliability is located. This section compares their foundations, methods, and focus, drawing on key contributions from narrative theory.

The rhetorical approach, originally developed by Booth and later refined by Nünning, sees unreliability as something built into the text itself as a conversation between the author, narrator, other characters, and the reader (Booth 155). In his view, the implied author includes clear signals that help the reader recognise when a narrator might be misleading, mistaken, or seeing things from a narrow point of view. On the other hand, the cognitive approach, advocated by theorists like

David Herman and Ansgar Nünning, argues that unreliability is not a fixed textual property but rather an interpretative effect, shaped by the reader's cognitive engagement, world knowledge, and narrative expectations (Nünning 32)

One major point of divergence between the two approaches lies in where they place interpretive authority. The rhetorical model centers on authorial intention and particularly through the concept of the implied author, who is the guiding voice behind the story. In this case, the narrator is not unreliable or mistaken. Instead, they are being used almost like a "spokesperson".

The implied author uses the narrator to express certain ideas, and they do this intentionally. It is like the author is putting on a "mask" which is the narrator to make those ideas more convincing or emotionally powerful for the reader (Phelan 9–10).

By contrast, the cognitive approach does not focus on the author's communicative intent. Instead, it places the focus on the reader's mental process. So, the implied author is not a fixed guide but the reader constructs it piece by piece based on the words, tone, events and other details in the story (Nünning 34).

Unlike the rhetorical approach, which defines unreliable narration based on how much the narrator's perspective differs from the norms of the implied author (Booth 158), the cognitive approach looks at something else. It focuses on the reader. From this point of view, a narrator is seen as unreliable when their version of events clashes with what the reader expects or believes to be reasonable, logical, or morally acceptable. As Ansgar Nünning explains, unreliability is recognised when the narrator's perspective stands in clear contradiction to the value system of the reader or of the text as a whole. In other words, the reader plays an active role in detecting unreliability by comparing the narrator's voice to their own understanding of how things should make sense (38).

While the rhetorical and cognitive approaches often focus on different perspectives, some scholars have critically examined the limits of each and even tried to connect them. For instance, Bruno Zerweck challenges the rhetorical perspective, particularly Booth's reliance on the implied author as a standard for identifying unreliable narration. He argues that this model is insufficient, as it does not account for the reader's role in constructing unreliability (151).

For Zerweck, unreliability is not something that is only in the text, it happens in the reader's mind while trying to make sense of the narrator's words. So instead of relying only on what the author supposedly meant, Zerweck shifts the focus on how readers actually understand and interpret what they're reading (153).

On the other hand, for scholars who try to bring the two approaches together, Ansgar Nünning, he criticises the rhetorical approach, especially Booth's definition of unreliable narration. He describes it as a "complex" definition that does not solve the problem but adds to it. In his words "it sets the fox to keep the geese" (30), meaning that this concept of the implied author is vague and does not give a solid way to decide whether the narrator is unreliable or not. He believes that instead of depending on the implied author or focusing solely on textual cues, it is essential to take into account the reader's interpretation and mental process (39-40).

In the end, both the rhetorical and cognitive approaches offer valuable but very different ways of understanding unreliable narration. The rhetorical model is based on communication, and focuses on what the narrator says compared to what the implied author meant and it relies heavily on authorial intention.

The cognitive approach, on the other hand, shifts the focus to the reader. It sees unreliability as something that happens during the reading process, shaped by the reader's expectations, background knowledge, and mental process. While both approaches have their strengths, they also have limits.

Critics like Bruno Zerweck argue that the rhetorical model is too vague and outdated, especially because it depends on the uncertain idea of the implied author. Instead, he supports a more modern, reader-based view. Ansgar Nünning agrees with this criticism but does not want to reject the rhetorical approach completely. He suggests a more flexible model that combines both textual clues and the reader's cognitive efforts to interpret them. This shows that the debate is not just about choosing one side over the other. Instead, the goal seems to be finding a balanced perspective that recognises how both the text and the reader work together in creating meaning. As scholars continue to explore unreliable narration, this kind of synthesis could offer the most complete and practical way of understanding how it works

1.4 Types of unreliable narration

Over time, the classification of unreliable narrators has been a subject of interest for many scholars. Each one has looked at it from a different angle, offering varying typologies to categorise the diverse forms unreliability can take. These typologies often reflect broader theoretical orientations whether psychological, rhetorical, structuralist, or cognitive and serve to organise the concept of unreliability in ways that can aid both analysis and interpretation.

Every reader must think of narrators as people and judge them by facing two linked challenges. First, they need to decide whether the narrator is telling the truth or not, and whether the narrator is honest, fair, intelligent or the opposite (Riggan 33). Second, if the narrator turns out to be unreliable, the reader must figure out what is really true in the story by looking at what values are missing or hidden (Riggan 34). To help with this, William Riggan suggests different types of unreliable narrators, which prepare readers to better recognise unreliability and understand what kind of narrator they're dealing with. The types that he proposes include:

1.4.1 The Picaro

A narrator who usually tells his own story, known for his rough background, often poor and neglectful parents. He feels rejected by society and tries to prove himself by pretending to be someone he's not. He usually has no stable job because he avoids hard work, and commits small crimes but only out of desire for attention or due to hunger. This, in turn, makes readers sympathise with him.

The Picaro's view of the world is usually bitter, sarcastic, and selfish, because his own version of truth is shaped by his need to defend and justify himself (Riggan 38-41).

A classic example of a picaro is found in the novel *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe. It tells the story of a woman who uses her charm, lies, and crime to escape poverty. She often hides or changes details in her narration to make herself look better, rewriting her past to justify her actions.

1.4.2 The Clown

As the name suggests, this type of narrators not meant to be taken seriously. Their way of saying things is foolish and exaggerated, and so, readers are not sure what to believe. Sometimes they tell the truth by accident, or they hide it in jokes.

According to Riggan, some clowns are really mentally unwell "natural fools" and some are just pretending to be foolish for entertainment "artificial" fools" (80). Which means that a clown narrator may be very clever but pretend to be crazy.

This kind of narrator can easily trick and manipulate readers, or they might be someone who really does not understand what is going on, making readers get confused and mixed up stories. He turns the story into a performance, where truth and lies are mixed together. In

both cases the reader cannot trust the narrator's version of events and has to read between the lines

1.4.3 The Madman

William Riggan defines "the madman" through the example of Clegg from John Fowles's *The Collector*, showing that madness can deeply affect the narrative. This type signals unreliability from the start, as someone whose version of reality is distorted to the point that readers cannot trust their account (109).

Sometimes it might not be obvious but that makes the unreliable narrator even more deceptive (110). For example when the narrator says "She was dead. Well I shut her mouth and got the eyelids down. I didn't know what to do then, I went and made myself a cup of tea." So this nonchalant response to death shows his emotional disconnection, and further cements his role as an unreliable narrator

Riggan notes that such narrators unintentionally expose their own guilt and instability, making readers doubt their reliability. Ultimately, the reader, guided by the implied author, recognises that the story is not about external truth but the narrator's descent into comic, grotesque, or tragic madness (Riggan 143).

1.4.4 The Naïf

A narrator whose unreliability does not come from being deceptive but from being innocent. Ironically, his unreliable view shows readers that he is better and more moral than he realises (Riggan 147). He records events honestly but without full understanding. This makes his voice feel authentic, but also means the reader must interpret the deeper meaning to understand (Riggan 148).

His straightforward, sensory descriptions create a sense of raw honesty, though they are often naïve. A key feature with both the picaro and the madman, especially in that their unreliable narration is used by the implied author to critique societal norms. However, unlike the picaro who manipulates, or the madman who distorts, the naïf is “largely unfamiliar” with the world and critiques it from a place of innocence and emotional sincerity (Riggan 169).

While the typology offered by William Riggan remains one of the most influential ways of classifying unreliable narrators, other scholars have approached the concept from different angles. For example, James Phelan, in his book *Living to Tell About It* (2005), identifies three dimensions of unreliability: mimetic, synthetic, and thematic (15), demonstrating how narrators can be unreliable in different ways. Each of these types affects how readers interpret the story and assess the narrator’s credibility, allowing for a more fluid, multi-layered understanding of unreliability.

1.5 Significance in shaping narratives

Unreliable narration is not just any narrative technique, it plays a crucial role in shaping how stories are constructed, understood, and emotionally absorbed. All in all, the decision to use an unreliable narrator affects every layer of the narrative, from plot construction to ethical interpretation. This section will examine how unreliability shapes the inner workings of narrative form and function.

Since Booth is widely regarded as the foundational figure in the study of unreliable narration, it is essential to acknowledge one of his key ideas on the subject. According to Booth, narration operates through an ongoing dialogue between the narrator, the implied author, the characters, and

the reader (155). This relationship is shaped by varying degrees of distance moral, intellectual, physical, or aesthetic between these entities (155).

For instance, the narrator may be more or less distant from the implied author, and this distance may shift depending on the values or perspectives each represents. It is this gap that often gives rise to unreliable narration, allowing the reader to engage with the narrative more critically and actively. In doing so, the narrative becomes not just a story told, but a space where meaning is constructed, challenged, and re-evaluated.

To identify an unreliable narrator, one must notice when the narrator's account of events, thoughts, or judgments conflicts with the values and viewpoints of the implied author (Prince 101). This concept provides a crucial clue which is the discrepancy between the narrator and the implied author.

However, as Nünning points out, the implied author is a concept created by the reader, based on how they interpret the text. It is not a real person, but an imagined version shaped by the narrative (34). In both perspectives, readers detect that something about the narrator's tone, moral stance, or interpretation of truth seems questionable, and they directly begin to analyse what is being conveyed, what is omitted, and how it is presented. Those "precise prints" indicate that the narrator's viewpoint may not be dependable.

Spotting these signs enables readers to challenge the narrator's trustworthiness and engage more thoughtfully with the narrative, crafting a meaning that aligns more closely with the implied author's true intent.

At this point, unreliable narration begins to affect not only how readers think about the story but also how they feel about it. As James Phelan explains, unreliable narration shapes the emotional connection between the narrator and the audience. He introduces two essential concepts: estranging unreliability, which "underlines or increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial

audience”, and bonding unreliability, which “reduces the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience” (9). This distinction illustrates how narrative technique does more than provoke analysis, it guides the reader’s sympathy or resistance by shaping how they relate to characters on an emotional and ethical level.

Additionally, the idea of unreliable narration changes over time. As Zerweck says, it is “a phenomenon that is culturally and historically variable” (151), which means that what people see as untrustworthy in a narrator depends on the time, culture, and society in which the story was written. A narrator who seems unreliable today might have been seen as normal a hundred years ago or vice versa.

Zerweck’s point is that the meaning and impact of a story change by time, and unreliable narration plays a significant role in that. This shows that narratives are shaped not just by plot but also by cultural ideas about truth, honesty, and storytelling. For example, for a long time, people thought the narrator in *The Vicar of Wakefield* was trustworthy and kind. But in the 1960s and 70s, people started seeing him as fake or dishonest. This shows that readers’ ideas changed because their values changed (Zerweck 158).

Most importantly, unreliable narration emerged as a defining technique of modernist and postmodernist fiction, creating intentional ambiguity in both the fictional world and the reader’s interpretive experience (Zerweck 215). This, in turn, transforms the entire narrative structure, it shifts the focus from what is told to how and why it is told.

To conclude, unreliable narration is a powerful and multifaceted narrative strategy that does far more than distort the truth, it reshapes the way the story is emotionally received, experienced, and interpreted. It works across different and multiple levels, it challenges the reader’s assumptions, and it makes the narrative more complex. Moreover, its capacity to manipulate both characters and readers positions it as a dynamic force that destabilises certainty and opens new

dimensions of meaning. As such, unreliable narration is not merely a tool of deception, but a narrative engine that redefines storytelling itself by demanding critical attention and reader participation in the construction of meaning.

1.6 Implications for psychological horror and madness

Psychological horror and madness have long been central thematic forces in literature, particularly in narratives shaped by unreliable narrators. These themes are often distinguished from other literary works by their focus on internal, mental, and emotional disturbances, rather than relying on external and supernatural entities. They expose the inner breakdown of characters, which, in turn distorts the reader's perception and unsettles narrative expectations.

The origins of horror fiction can be directly traced back to the emergence of gothic literature in the late eighteenth century, where the genre was predominantly defined by supernatural elements, monstrous figures, and eerie settings (Carrol 15). Later, a new form of horror began to transition inward, shifting the focus from external terrors to internal psychological ones.

This evolution marked the rise of psychological horror, where fear stems not from monsters, but from the instability of the mind and the blurring of reality and delusion (Carrol 15). As critic Douglas E. Winter famously asserts, "Horror is not a genre, but an emotion" (Winter 12). This shift moved horror away from fixed tropes and toward an exploration of affective, personal dread.

As horror began to focus more on emotions and the human mind, it naturally led to themes like fear, anxiety, and especially "madness", a theme that stands at the core of many unreliable narratives. According to Lillian Feder, madness is reflected in real life psychological states (7). In this context, the idea that unreliable narration, particularly in psychological horror, mirrors actual disruptions in mental coherence, making the narrator's unreliability both realistic and disturbing.

To put it simply, it becomes not only a subject of horror but also a narrative force that distorts perception and challenges reality.

It is often expressed not just in what they say, but also in how they say it (Feder 10). In this sense, narrative unreliability becomes an index of madness, not just the narrator's story but also the structure, rhythm, and logic of their narration. This can be seen clearly in texts such as "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the narrator's obsession with the wallpaper and her belief that a woman is trapped behind it reveal her mental breakdown. Her writing shifts from calm to chaotic, showing how her mind is unravelling. This instability in expression makes her narration unreliable.

Overall, psychological horror and madness are strongly linked, especially when they appear through unreliable narrators. These stories move away from the usual use of ghosts or monsters. They focus instead on what happens inside the mind. This kind of horror does not only lies in the events being told, but also in the way they are told. The narrator's confusion, broken thoughts, or strange way of speaking often give clues to a deeper mental struggle. Sometimes, the story feels unclear or hard to follow, which reflects the unstable state of the character's mind. Because of this, readers are often left unsure about what is real and what is not. The effect is not only emotional, but also structural, shaping the whole way the story works. And through this, madness becomes not just a theme, but part of the storytelling itself.

CHAPTER TWO

A Case Study of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

2.1 Introduction

If unreliable narration is to be fully understood, it must be studied not only as a theoretical concept, but also through the texts that bring it to life. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" offers a powerful example where narrative distortion, mental instability, and storytelling technique all intersect. This chapter begins with a brief biography of Poe, showing how his life experiences, particularly loss and emotional turmoil, deeply influenced his writing. A short overview of the story follows, setting the stage for a closer analysis of unreliable narration. The discussion then focuses on three main indicators: the narrator's false claims, his psychological profile, and the structural and stylistic cues that reflect instability. Through these elements, the chapter highlights how both cognitive and rhetorical theories work together to shape the reader's experience of unreliability.

2.2 Biography of the Author

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in a modest lodging house near Boston's Carver Street. His family background was a unique blend of artistic and patriotic heritage, and his parents were traveling actors, while his grandfather, David Poe Sr., had once supported General Lafayette during the Revolutionary War (Meyers 3).

Despite this proud lineage, those early years were anything but stable, as Poe came into a world marked by hardship and uncertainty. Tragically, his father faced immense pressure, both emotionally and financially, which led him to abandon his career and his family. Shortly after, his mother, Eliza, was back on the stage barely a month after giving birth, a decision that sadly took a toll on her health and led to her early death (Meyers 6). These difficulties were marked by

instability, poverty, and emotional strain, which cast a long shadow over Poe's life and writing (Meyers 4).

Edgar, barely three years old, was present during his mother's final days and was likely haunted by the sight of her illness and suffering. This traumatic loss, coupled with the absence of his father, left Poe effectively orphaned. Despite this tragedy, Poe inherited from his mother a profound artistic sensitivity, natural talent, and vivid imagination, all of which would play a crucial role in his development as a writer (Meyers 6).

During his early years, Edgar spent part of his childhood studying at a school in Enfield, England, which offered a progressive and humane approach to learning. The curriculum emphasised subjects such as English, French, mathematics, and Latin. Also, the school maintained a notably gentler atmosphere, where teachers avoided the use of "physical punishment" which was often found in more elite institutions (Meyers 11).

At school, Poe was described as a quick and clever boy (Meyers 13). This shows that even from a young age, Poe stood out for his sharp mind, despite the emotional effects of his upbringing. At a young age, Poe fell in love with his neighbour, Elmira Royster, and they became secretly engaged. However, this relationship ended because her father, for social and financial reasons, intercepted Poe's letters and kept them from reaching her (Meyers 18). Later, this heartbreak left Poe deeply affected, and he carried that emotional pain with him when he went to university. During that time, he began writing more seriously, and this marked the beginning of his literary career.

Many of Poe's works were shaped by what he went through. For instance, his poem "Song" was inspired by Elmira and expresses his lingering pain after her marriage to someone else (Meyers 18). Another major emotional influence was Jane Stanard, the mother of one of his childhood friends, who died when Poe was still a teenager. She became a model for the idealised, lost woman

in several of his later works, most notably “To Helen” and possibly “Annabel Lee.” In fact, “Annabel Lee” is one of Poe’s most famous poems about love and loss, and it reflects his ongoing obsession with the death of a beautiful woman, a theme deeply rooted in his personal experiences. His relationship with his foster father, John Allan, also affected him deeply.

Poe felt emotionally rejected and unsupported, and this emotional tension appears in several of his darker works, particularly those dealing with isolation and fractured identity. Stories like “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), and “William Wilson” (1839), as well as the poem “Alone” (1829), all explore characters struggling with psychological torment, self-conflict, or alienation from society. Through these works, Poe channels his own inner turmoil, creating narratives that reflect both personal grief and existential estrangement.

2.3 Narrative Overview of “The Tell-Tale Heart”

The story begins with a narrator who insists that he is not mad, claiming that he is mentally stable and that his heightened senses are a sign of intelligence, not insanity. As the story unfolds, he tells us about an old man whose eye deeply unsettles him. He describes it as a vulture pale eye, with a film over it that fills him with unease. He becomes obsessed with it and starts watching the old man at night, waiting for the right moment to act. It is as if he believes that once the eye is gone, he will feel safe again.

For several nights, he opens the old man’s bedroom door slowly, checking if the eye is open, but it never is, so he does not act. His focus is not on the old man himself, but on the eye, which he sees as the real threat. On the eighth night, however, while sneaking into the room, his finger slips and makes a noise. The old man wakes up, frightened, and calls out. The narrator stays still for an hour, then slowly opens the lantern to shine light on the eye.

This time, it is open. Seeing the eye fills him with rage. He hears the old man's heart beating louder and louder until, fearing the sound will be heard by a neighbour, he rushes into the room. He smothers the old man, and eventually, the heart stops beating. He then hides the body by cutting it into pieces and placing it beneath the floorboards. He is careful and proud of how well he has concealed everything.

Around 4 a.m., the police arrive. A neighbour had reported hearing a scream. Calm and confident, the narrator invites the officers in and shows them around the house, even placing his chair directly over the spot where the body is hidden. At first, everything seems to be going well, but then he starts to feel uneasy. A sound begins to ring in his ears, the same dull beating of the old man's heart.

Though the officers appear unaware of the sound, the narrator becomes increasingly disturbed. He talks more loudly, gestures wildly, and paces, but the sound grows louder and louder. He believes the officers are mocking him, pretending not to hear it. Overwhelmed by guilt and paranoia, he finally breaks down, confesses to the murder, and tells them to tear up the floorboards to reveal the hidden body.

2.4 Indicators of Unreliability in the Narrator

This section explores the narrator's unreliability in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", a story deeply marked by madness, obsession, and emotional instability. Building on the theoretical discussion in Chapter One, the analysis will focus on how the narrator manipulates the reader's perception of truth and reality. This will be done through three key aspects: first, by examining the false cues used to mislead the reader; second, by analysing the narrator's mental and psychological state as revealed through his speech and behaviour; and finally, by looking at

the structure of the narrative and how it contributes to the sense of instability and contradiction.

Together, these elements help reveal the depth of the narrator's unreliability and how it shapes the meaning of the story.

2.4.1 False cues

In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator's unreliability is not overtly stated but implied through various false cues. One of the most important of these is the narrator's repeated claims to sanity, which function as a classic form of denial intended to cover his madness. The narrator asks, "Why will you say that I'm mad?" (TTH 3), which immediately introduces a claim of sanity. This question functions as a classic false cue, an insistence meant to deny the very insanity he displays. He claims that he is sane, and emphasises that the disease has "sharpened" his senses rather than destroyed them (TTH 3). Through this, the narrator attempts to cover his madness by presenting a different perspective on his condition.

Instead of being weakened by the disease, he argues that it has enhanced his perception. This claim not only denies madness but also suggests that he possesses a special ability, a heightened sense that others lack. The narrator tries to give proof of this by referring to a supernatural hearing in his words "I heard all things in heaven and in the earth" (TTH 3). This statement, which is used as evidence to support his sanity, is in fact, a false cue that does the opposite. It actually hints at delusion. He also tries to prove his sanity by emphasising his calmness. For instance, he claims to be telling the story calmly, and later describes how "wisely" and "carefully" he went to work (TTH 3). However this calmness feels unnatural and forced, which raises doubts about his mental stability.

Moreover, the narrator skillfully knows how to provoke sympathy and manipulate the reader's feelings, he begins with a seemingly honest confession that it's impossible to explain how

the idea of murder entered his mind (TTH 3). This, in turn, shifts responsibility away and invites readers to suspend judgment. He then brings up his affection to the old man, in his words “I love the old man” and “he never wronged me” (TTH 3). By this, he tries to convince the reader that the crime was not driven by hatred or greed and it is not beyond personal reasons. This false cue hides the truth by presenting an apparently reasonable justification.

In addition to that, he also emphasises how kind he was to the old man during the week before killing him. He says, “I had never been kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him” (TTH 3). This shows that he is trying to hide his evil side by showing the best version of himself, as if he were a good, caring person, and more likely to be a victim rather than the villain in the story, so that the readers sympathise with him even though he is the one who committed the crime. What is more, the narrator shares his own experience with terror, when he says it has welled up from my own bosom, the terrors that distracted me” (TTH 5). This is done in order to build that emotional experience between himself and the old man, and this, in turn, invites readers to relate to him and sympathise with him.

Furthermore, the narrator’s careful planning for the crime is meticulously misleading, as it hides his madness and obsession. For instance, he says, “I opened the door oh, so gently and then when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern...” (TTH 3), and also claims that he was careful “so that I might not disturb the old man’s sleep” (3), or when he says “calling him by name in a hearty tone” (TTH 4). That is to say, he tries to present himself as thoughtful and considerate, disguising his true intentions under the illusion of caution. He emphasises that he spent seven long nights watching the old man sleep (TTH 4), which he uses to convince the reader that he is calm, rational, and fully in control.

This obsessive attention to detail is not only disturbing but functions as a false cue, masking irrational behaviour as precision. He even adds that he did not kill the old man right away because

his eye was closed, he suggests that the motive is not hatred toward the man himself, but for the vulture eye (TTH 4).

Another instance appears in the narrator's words: "I did not move a muscle for a whole hour" (TTH 4). This shows extreme self-control, clearly used to convince the reader of his sanity and patience. However, the behaviour feels too exaggerated, which raises suspicion about his mental state rather than confirming his rationality. Another crucial moment is his careful attention to noise and detail: "My finger slid on a piece of metal and made a noise." This adds to the illusion of control, but it also acts as a false cue, hiding his deeper obsession and instability.

Above all, the narrator seems to manipulate not only the audience, but even himself. When the officers arrive after some neighbours reported hearing a shriek, they begin to question him. He smiles and says, "What had I to fear?" (TTH 7), this reveals a deeper level of unreliability. He is not only trying to deceive the others, but is also being deceived by his own mind. He seems unaware of the horror of his crime, or perhaps he refuses to acknowledge it. The narrator might believe he is telling the whole truth, but he is blind to his own madness. What is more, the narrator's final confession "Villains! I shrieked, dissemble no more! I admit the deed! Tear up the planks! Here, here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!" (TTH 8) Does not come from guilt in the traditional sense, but from psychological breakdown. This suggests that his unreliability is not only in what he hides, but in how he frames, justifies, and ultimately misunderstands his own actions.

2.4.2 Psychological Profile of the Narrator

Unreliable narration is not just about textual inconsistencies or formal cues in the narrative, it also depends on the narrator's psychological state. In fact, understanding the mind of the narrator can reveal the root of his unreliability. Each case of unreliable narration can be more accurately understood when categorised within a specific type, such as those outlined by William Riggan in

his typology of unreliable narrators. Among these types such as the clown, the naïf, the picaro, and the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart”, who most clearly aligns with the figure of the madman.

As Riggan notes in his discussion of Poe’s first-person gothic tales, these narrators often display “frenzied self-defensiveness,” “compulsive confessions,” and “an almost singular orientation toward the ironic portrayal of psychological perversity” (132). For instance, a clear sign of madness in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the narrator’s repeated insistence that he is not mad. He says things like, “Why would you say that I am mad?” (TTH 3) And “You fancy me mad? Madmen know nothing” (TTH 3). Here, we see how he brings up the accusation of madness even before anyone else does. These repeated defensive statements, along with his agitated tone, suggest a deeper instability. His obsession with proving his sanity ironically becomes a sign of madness itself. Instead of reassuring the reader, this “frenzied” self-defensiveness only makes him sound more unreliable.

Another strong indicator of madness is the narrator’s belief in having an extremely “acute sense of hearing” (TTH 3). This is an exaggerated sense of perception, and his absolute confidence in something so impossible, reveals his self-deception and reinforces his unreliability and it is a clear sign of delusion. This delusional thinking appears again when he claims to hear the sound of the old man’s heartbeat even after the man is dead. He describes it growing “louder, louder, louder” (TTH 8), which reflects a form of auditory hallucination.

These hallucinations expose the narrator’s break from reality and reveal the depth of his mental instability. Beyond this, the narrator’s hallucinations reflect a deeper disconnection from reality. There is clearly a kind of detachment in the narrator’s psychological profile. For example, he shows a distorted and exaggerated sense of time. At one point, he claims that it took him an hour

just to place his head slowly through the doorway to see the old man lying in bed (TTH 4). This exaggerated perception of time borders on the impossible and reveals how disconnected he is from the physical world around him. It is unlikely and irrational for someone to take an hour to simply move their head without making a sound, which emphasises his obsessive and delusional thinking.

Another striking moment is when he says he can hear “all things in heaven and in the earth” (TTH 3). This is not just an exaggeration, it also reflects a total disconnection from reality, suggesting he believes he has supernatural powers. These elements, taken together, show how his mind distorts both time and sensory experience, reinforcing his unreliability and unstable mental state.

In addition, the narrator tries to convince both himself and the reader that his actions are logical and reasonable through self-justification and rationalisation. For instance, he justifies the murder by claiming it was not out of anger or greed, but simply because of the old man’s “evil eye” (TTH 4). However, this logic makes no real sense and fails to provide true justification. Also, the narrator shows several sociopathic tendencies. For example, when he invites the police in with a calm attitude, sits with them, and with complete audacity places his chair directly over the hidden corpse (TTH 7).

This situation shows that he takes pleasure in his ability to deceive and control. Another clear indication of the narrator’s unreliability is his obsession and fixation on the evil eye, especially when he repeats the word “eye” several times. This shows how much he is obsessed with it, or how the eye completely overtakes his thoughts. For example, when he says, “I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!” (TTH 3), it shows how fixated he is. He even seems to convince himself, not just the reader. By saying “I think,” he is rethinking the idea, and when he says “it was this,” he becomes fully convinced that it is truly the eye that justifies the murder.

The psychological profile of the narrator is also seen in his emotional instability. For example, the narrator claims that he pitied the old man, but then he kills him without hesitation. What is worse, he laughs at the same moment, saying “I chuckled” (TTH 5). This is even more disturbing because it shows a shocking disconnect between the gravity of his actions and his emotional response.

Another example is the contrast between confidence and terror. For instance, he welcomes the police with a smile and full confidence, but once he starts hearing the sound of the old man’s heartbeat, which is not real and only exists in his mind, he starts to panic, and as William Riggan argues the unreliable narrator always ends up exposing his guilt and instability, the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” ultimately exposes his crime and confesses the murder, reinforcing the idea that his emotional and psychological state is deeply disturbed (TTH 8).

2.4.3 Stylistic and Structural Markers of Unreliability

Narrative style and structure are just as important as the other indicators when it comes to revealing unreliability. They play a crucial role in helping readers to detect the narrator’s instability and confusion. Especially in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, the way the story is told supports and even guides the unreliable voice of the narrator. This part will focus on several narrative techniques that subtly shape the reader’s perception and expose the narrator’s disturbed state of mind. These include unexpected shifts in tense, exaggerated statements, internal contradictions, obsessive repetition, and the absence of external perspectives. Together, these features form a narrative structure that not only reflects but amplifies the narrator’s unreliability.

2.4.3.1 Disjointed Temporal Structure

The first and most noticeable feature is the disjointed temporal structure, where the narrator jumps between timeframes and ideas without any clear or logical order. For example, the story begins with the narrator aggressively addressing an imagined audience, asking “why will you say that I am mad” (TTH 3), a question that no one has voiced, then immediately answers it himself. This shift from an outward justification to inward reflection illustrates how the narrator slips between directly addressing the imagined listener and retreating into his own thoughts, which adds to the sense of confusion and emotional instability.

The same opening lines also reveal how this disjointed temporal structure operates on the level of tenses. For instance, in “I had been and I am” (TTH 3), the narrator collapses past and present into a single confused moment. Such a shift in verb tense, occurring in one sentence, disrupts the chronological flow and creates a fractured sense of time. Another clearer example, the narrator says “I heard everything in heaven and in the earth, I heard many things in hell” the use of the word “heard” shows an action that happened in the past, but this ambitious hearing of everything, suggests an ongoing perhaps delusional perception.

What is more revealing, however, is that the narrator does not merely shift but blurs the line between past and present, it appears in the sentence “I was never kinder to the old man then during the whole week before I killed him” (TTH 3). Here, he reflects on a supposed kindness in the past “was never kinder”, while simultaneously referring to the murder “before I killed him” as if both acts coexisted in the same mental space, as if the line between intention and action, between memory and present awareness, has collapsed. This merging of timelines not only blurs

chronological clarity, but also suggests a deeper detachment from reality, where past and present are no longer clearly separated in his mind.

Another instance of temporal instability appears in: “I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this” (TTH 3). The narrator’s use of “I think” followed by the past tense “was” in a such quick succession indicates a confusion between current reasoning and past events. Furthermore, this disorientation shows up again when he says “I went down to open it with a light heart for what had I now to fear?”(TTH 7) here the act of “went down” s clearly in the past, yet the rhetorical question “had I now to fear” suddenly shifts to the present. This back and forth basically shows the narrator’s inability to maintain a stable timeline and mirrors his disoriented mental state, which emphasises his instability and unreliability.

2.4.3.2 Hyperbole

One of the clearest signs that the narrator is unreliable comes from the way he constantly exaggerates, his descriptions are completely dramatic, and go far beyond what would normally be believable. For instance, when the narrator claims he could hear all things in heaven, on earth, and even in hell (TTH 3), it suggests a supernatural level of perception that reveals his delusions and is a clear sign of mental instability. Another example is in his decision to kill the old man just to get rid of his eye, which he even compares it to a vulture’s (TTH 4). This is wildly exaggerated, as he sees it not just as creepy but as a full-blown horror.

This exaggeration is also seen when he claims that it took him an hour to place his head within the opening (TTH 4). It is an obvious overstatement and highly unrealistic for anyone to spend that much time on such a simple act, which also highlights how obsessive and mentally unbalanced he is. Another clear instance of hyperbole is when the narrator becomes terrified by

the sound of the old man's heartbeat, and claims that it grew louder and louder until he believed it would be heard by a neighbour (THH 6). The idea that a heartbeat could echo through walls is clearly unrealistic and reflects not reality, but the narrator's distorted perception. It is a projection of his overwhelming guilt and anxiety that makes his confusion feel like an external threat.

The narrator creates a sense of excessive drama to justify his actions, when he says, "the old man's hour had come! And "he shrieked once once only" (THH 6), he uses this language to present the murder as some grand inevitable act, and to make his actions appear epic and justified. However, these descriptions are not directly necessary for the event but serve to make his irrational and violent behavior seem heroic.

2.4.3.3 Repetition

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is rich with repetition, a technique used by the implied author to reflect the narrator's obsession, anxiety, and deteriorating mental state. One of the examples is in the line: "True! Nervous very very dreadfully nervous I had been and I am" (TTH 3). The doubling of "very" heightens the emotional intensity and adds to the narrator's anxious self-insistence. Rather than just calming the listener, this exaggerated emphasis suggests that he is trying to convince himself as much as the audience, which paradoxically invites doubt.

A second pattern of repetition appears in the use of the word "cautiously" (THH 3) when the narrator describes how he undid the lantern at the old man's door at night. This kind of repetition reflects the narrator's obsession and his careful attention with every detail. Similarly, phrases like "slowly slowly" (TTH 3) also show how he is fixated on controlling the situation, adding to the tension, as if even the smallest sound could ruin everything.

The narrator also intensifies the panic by repeating the word "louder louder louder!" (TTH 8) This obsessive repetition signals an auditory hallucination or a psychological break, helping

the narrative structure reveal the unreliability of the narrator. The repeated “Louder” does not just describe the sound of the heartbeats growing stronger, but rather represents his growing guilt and remorse. He feels deeply regretful for killing the old man, and the imagined noise becomes an expression of that inner torment. Another example appears in “I foamed I raved I swore!” (THH 8) This repetition of “I” combined with violent verbs clearly illustrates his emotional breakdown. It creates a sense of chaos and shows how he has completely lost self-control.

2.4.3.4 Contradiction

Throughout the story, the narrator often makes claims that directly contradict his actions or other statements, exposing a confused mindset. For example, he says that he loved the old man, but then immediately assumes he is going to kill him because of his eye (THH 3). This completely undermines his statement of affection. He tries to justify the murder, but the contradiction is clear and unavoidable.

Another example is when he claims to have been kinder to the old man during the final week before killing him, which is illogical (THH 3). It is difficult to believe someone could express kindness toward a person they are secretly planning to murder. This contradiction not only undermines his reliability but also shows how confused his thinking really is. He tries to convince the reader of his affection, yet his actions point in the opposite direction.

Even more revealing is the fact that he claim to pity the old man, only to burst into laughter moments later (THH 5), it adds another strange layer to this inconsistency. His words are full of emotion, kindness, pity, care, but his actions are violent and calculated. This kind of contradiction makes it difficult to trust anything he says and suggests he may be speaking nonsensically without even realising it. Over time, these moments build up a tension between what he says and

what he does, eventually breaking his sense of reality. It is as if he is trapped in his own performance, shifting between emotions without any stable logic. There is also a strange “high” or rush in how he describes these contradictions, almost like he is feeding off the drama of his own story, which makes the gap between truth and imagination even wider.

Another contradiction appears when the narrator insists he is not mad, yet his behaviour tells a different story. He tries to prove his sanity by describing the murder in extreme detail, showing how clever and logical he is, especially when he says “if you still think me mad you will think so longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body” (TTH7) as if carefully planning a murder somehow proves he is sane. But how can a mentally stable person kill an old man simply because of his eye? Or more precisely, how can someone justify such a horrific deed just because of a physical feature.

The contradiction becomes even clearer when, after confidently stating that he had hidden the body so well no one would ever find it (TTH 7), he suddenly confesses his own crime. This breakdown shows that his mind is too unstable to maintain the lie he so confidently built. Moreover, throughout the story, he often claims to be calm, yet describes horrific acts with intense emotion and vivid detail. This repeated contradiction between his words and actions makes it impossible to fully trust anything he says, exposing the narrator’s disturbed state of mind, which drives the entire story.

2.4.3.5 Lack of external validation

The story is entirely told in the first person, meaning there is no perspective or opinion from other characters, not the old man, not the neighbour, not even the police in any meaningful way. The narrator dominates the narrative completely, and no one else verifies or challenges the events

he recounts. This lack of external input creates a closed narrative loop where the reader is forced to rely solely on the narrator's version of reality, which is clearly unstable. For instance, when he claims to hear the old man's heart beating beneath the floorboards, the police show no signs of hearing anything. Their calm presence contrasts sharply with the narrator's rising panic, suggesting that the sound might not exist outside his imagination. Even his sudden confession is not prompted by interrogation or pressure, he simply breaks down under what he describes as the unbearable noise, a reaction that remains unacknowledged by the officers.

This absence of external validation raises several important questions: What if the murder did not happen exactly as he claims? What if the "vulture eye" was never a true motive, but a symbol of his own distorted perception? What if the confession itself is purely imagined or a projection of his guilt rather than a factual account? Since none of the other characters offer any alternative viewpoint, the narrator is free to frame the story in whatever way fits his shifting emotional state. The police do not interrupt or comment meaningfully, and the old man, once dead, is never given a voice at all. Even the setting remains vague and confined, as readers never leave the space of the narrator's mind. This complete lack of external validation forces the reader to question the narrator's entire story and highlights the depth of his unreliability.

2.5 Narrative instability as cognitive and rhetorical strategy

Narrative instability refers to moments in a story where the reliability of the narration is called into question, creating a sense of uncertainty about what is true within the fictional world. This instability is not random; rather, it is a deliberate strategy used by authors to engage readers on multiple levels. At its core, the technique involves a combination of textual signals such as contradictions, unclear motives, or inconsistent details that invite readers to question the

narrator's account. These textual cues guide readers in interpreting the story, shaping their understanding while simultaneously provoking deeper mental involvement. This process highlights the complex interaction between the narrative's form and the reader's cognitive activity.

In "The Tell-Tale Heart", Edgar Allan Poe exemplifies this strategy by constructing a narrator whose mental state is clearly unstable, yet whose account demands close attention. The textual cues embedded in the narration allow the implied author to lead readers through the story while signaling that something is amiss. For example, the narrator's repeated insistence on his sanity, paired with his obsessive and violent thoughts, creates a tension that encourages readers to look beyond the surface of the words. These cues act as subtle prompts for readers to question and analyse the narrator's reliability, thus engaging their interpretive faculties.

At the same time, the cognitive dimension of narrative instability relies on readers' ability to draw from their own knowledge and experience. Understanding the narrator's mental illness, for instance, requires more than simply reading the text; it demands recognition of real-world patterns of behaviour and psychological conditions. Readers use their previous knowledge whether from everyday life, education, or cultural understanding to make sense of the narrator's disturbed mind. This cognitive involvement deepens the experience of the story and emphasises the instability of the narrative as readers actively try to reconcile the narrator's claims with what they know about reality.

This interplay between textual cues and reader cognition demonstrates how narrative instability functions as a dual strategy. The textual elements, which can be seen as guiding signals from the implied author, shape the framework within which readers interpret the story.

Meanwhile, readers' cognitive responses fill in gaps, question inconsistencies, and navigate the

ambiguities in the narrative. For example, when the narrator describes his heightened senses or his fixation on the old man's eye, readers rely on their understanding of psychological distress to grasp the significance of these details. Thus, narrative instability is created not only by the story's internal contradictions but also by the active engagement of readers interpreting those contradictions.

In this way, "The Tell-Tale Heart" showcases the convergence of two approaches to unreliability: the rhetorical and the cognitive. The rhetorical aspect is visible in the crafted use of language, repetition, and narrative structure that signal the narrator's instability. The cognitive aspect is reflected in the reader's mental work to interpret these signals based on outside knowledge and reasoning. Rather than existing separately, these dimensions operate together to create a rich, layered narrative experience. The result is a story that challenges readers to navigate uncertainty, question the narrator's truthfulness, and engage deeply with the themes of madness and perception.

2.6 Conclusion

In reflection, considering the elements discussed above, such as the use of false cues, the mental deterioration of the narrator, and the disjointed narrative structure, it becomes clear that these features are not randomly placed, but serve a deeper interpretive function. From a rhetorical standpoint, the narrator's repeated claims of sanity, his calculated storytelling, and the selective way in which he presents events reflect deliberate narrative control. These techniques are not neutral; they shape meaning within the story and guide interpretation in a particular direction.

At the same time, the earlier analysis of his mental condition, which includes hallucinations, obsessive reasoning, and emotional instability, corresponds to what cognitive theory identifies as a breakdown in perception. These disruptions are not employed to deceive, but are symptoms of

an internal disorder that warps the narration itself. In this way, rhetorical strategy and cognitive distortion operate simultaneously, reinforcing one another throughout the story's progression.

This analysis supports the central argument of this dissertation: that unreliable narration in psychological horror cannot be fully understood through a single theoretical lens. Poe's narrator embodies both rhetorical manipulation and cognitive breakdown. His pleas for sanity and detailed control over the story reflect rhetorical intent, while his auditory hallucinations and obsessive logic point to a fractured mind. Therefore, it is only through the combined lens of rhetorical and cognitive theory that we can grasp the full psychological and narrative impact of Poe's storytelling.

This groundwork was brought into practice in the second chapter, which turned toward Poe's short story not only as a literary text but as a case study in how madness and manipulation intersect. The biography of Poe offered insight into the emotional and psychological depth from which "The Tell-Tale Heart" emerged, while the plot summary set the stage for identifying the indicators of unreliability: textual cues, psychological fragmentation, and structural disorientation. What became clear through this analysis is that false signals within the narrative are not just tricks, they are invitations for the reader to look deeper. The psychological profile of the narrator, marked by obsessive logic and possible auditory hallucinations, demands a cognitive engagement, while his rhetorical strategies, his direct address, his insistent claims of sanity, reveal a desire to control the reader's perception.

General Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, the concept of unreliable narration has been examined not simply as a literary device, but as a rich and layered phenomenon that reflects deeper questions about truth, perception, and human psychology. What initially seemed to be a matter of identifying whether a narrator can be trusted soon revealed itself to be far more complex. By drawing on both rhetorical and cognitive theories, and by grounding the discussion in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", this study has shown that unreliability in narrative does not rest on a single cause or intention, but emerges through a subtle combination of textual strategies and psychological indicators.

In the first chapter, theoretical approaches were introduced to provide a foundation for understanding how unreliability functions. William Riggan's typology, along with the rhetorical framework of Wayne C. Booth and the cognitive insights proposed by scholars like Ansgar Nünning, were essential in shaping the analytical tools used throughout. What became especially significant was the idea that rhetorical unreliability based on the relationship between narrator, implied author, and reader, and cognitive unreliability which is based on the reader's real-world knowledge and mental modeling can overlap in ways that enrich and complicate narrative interpretation.

This groundwork was brought into practice in the second chapter, which turned toward Poe's short story not only as a literary text but as a case study in how madness and manipulation intersect. The biography of Poe offered insight into the emotional and psychological depth from which "The Tell-Tale Heart" emerged, while the plot summary set the stage for identifying the indicators of unreliability: textual cues, psychological fragmentation, and structural disorientation. What became clear through this analysis is that false signals within the narrative are not just tricks, they

are invitations for the reader to look deeper. The psychological profile of the narrator, marked by obsessive logic and possible auditory hallucinations, demands a cognitive engagement, while his rhetorical strategies, his direct address, and his insistent claims of sanity reveals a desire to control the reader's perception.

As these layers unfolded, it became evident that both the rhetorical and cognitive approaches are needed to fully grasp the nature of this narrator's unreliability. These are not conflicting readings, but complementary ones. The false cues engage the reader rhetorically, while the narrator's disturbed mental state activates cognitive judgment. The reader is thus caught between believing and doubting, reading and interpreting, following the narrator's words while resisting them at the same time.

This dual movement between what is said and what is meant, between what is shown and what is hidden, is where the true power of unreliable narration lies, especially within psychological horror. It is not only about misleading the reader, but about drawing them into an unstable world where certainty itself is questioned. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", this ambiguity becomes the very essence of the story's tension and horror.

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