

DREAM AS WISH-FULFILMENT AND GUILT PROJECTION: A FREUDIAN READING OF THE NARRATOR IN THE TELL-TALE

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Abstract

This article examines Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" through a Freudian lens, interpreting the narrator's obsession and confession as manifestations of dream logic and guilt projection. Drawing upon Freud's concept of dreams as wish-fulfilments, the study suggests that the narrator's murder of the old man symbolises a displaced fulfilment of his unconscious desire to annihilate the internalised paternal figure. However, this wish-fulfilment transforms into psychic punishment as the repressed guilt resurfaces through the auditory hallucination of the beating heart. The story's fragmented narration mirrors the dream-work mechanisms of condensation and displacement, revealing how Poe dramatises the collapse between wish and guilt within the human psyche. Freud's theories from *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* serve as the interpretive framework to decode the narrator's divided self, where the unconscious transforms forbidden desire into symbolic action, only to return it as moral terror.

Keywords: Freud; wish-fulfilment; repression; guilt; dream-work; unconscious; Poe; The Tell-Tale Heart

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) remains one of the most psychologically charged short stories in American literature, often read as an exploration of the mind's darkest recesses. While critics have approached the tale from various perspectives, ranging from Gothic horror to moral allegory, its narrative intensity and obsessive subjectivity make it especially amenable to a Freudian reading. The unnamed narrator's fragmented confession, punctuated by paranoia and auditory hallucinations, invites interpretation through the mechanisms of the unconscious described by Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

Freud famously argued that dreams represent "the disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 160). This principle provides a lens through which the narrator's actions can be seen as symbolic enactments of desires that are otherwise forbidden or inaccessible to the conscious mind. The murder of the old man, committed not out of hatred but due to his "vulture eye" (Poe 303), can be interpreted as a projection of the narrator's own internal conflict, where fear and desire are indistinguishably intertwined. The tale becomes a psychic theatre in which the narrator's wish to silence the paternal authority figure materialises under the guise of rational precision and control.

At the same time, Freud's later concept of the death drive (Thanatos), elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), complicates the understanding of wish-fulfilment by revealing a human tendency toward self-destruction and repetition. The narrator's compulsive insistence that he is sane, alongside his voluntary confession, indicates the cyclical tension between wish and guilt, pleasure and punishment. The present study thus examines "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a narrative that externalises the Freudian dynamics of repression, wish-fulfilment, and guilt projection, transforming the text into both a confession and a dream of self-exposure.

Analysis

Freud's theory of dream-work offers a productive framework for decoding the narrator's fragmented consciousness in "The Tell-Tale Heart." In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud describes the dream as a psychic formation in which the "latent dream-thoughts" are transformed into "manifest content" through processes of displacement and condensation (Freud 277). Similarly, the narrator's story functions like a dream narrative, where hidden impulses are displaced onto external objects, particularly the old man's "vulture eye." The obsessive fixation on this eye, which he claims to "hate", though he "loved the old man" (Poe 303), embodies this displacement. The narrator's violence is not directed toward the old man as a person but toward what the eye represents, the gaze of moral scrutiny, the internalised father figure that surveils and judges.

This projection corresponds with Freud's notion that repressed wishes often reappear in disguised, symbolic form. As Freud explains, "Repression acts successfully only if the wish remains unconscious" (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 346). The narrator's insistence on his sanity, "You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me" (Poe 303), reveals his compulsion to rationalise the irrational, to maintain the illusion of control even as his language betrays hysteria. The more he denies madness, the more his speech exposes it. His monologue thus becomes a confessional space where repressed content slips through linguistic cracks, echoing Freud's claim that "the unconscious is the true psychological reality" (*Interpretation of Dreams* 613).

The act of murder, in this context, operates as a symbolic wish-fulfilment, a dramatised elimination of the paternal eye that embodies moral surveillance. Freud maintained that “the father is the original object of ambivalent feelings” (Totem and Taboo 191), simultaneously feared and desired. In destroying the eye, the narrator metaphorically eliminates the father’s gaze, enacting an unconscious rebellion against authority. Yet this supposed fulfilment quickly turns to punishment. The narrator hears “a low, dull, quick sound, such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” (Poe 305), which gradually becomes unbearable. This auditory hallucination represents what Freud terms the “return of the repressed” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 23): the resurgence of guilt that the ego cannot contain.

The heartbeat functions as the externalisation of this repressed guilt. What begins as a wish to silence conscience results in its amplification. The narrator projects his internal moral terror onto an imagined sensory phenomenon, hearing in the heart what his own psyche cannot repress. As Freud observed, “what is repressed never ceases to strive for expression” (The Ego and the Id 18). The sound of the heart thus bridges wish and guilt; it is both the fulfilment of desire and the punishment for it. In attempting to prove his sanity, the narrator exposes his divided self: the conscious ego seeking justification and the unconscious superego demanding retribution.

Poe’s narrative technique reinforces this Freudian dynamic. The story’s syntax mimics dream distortion through abrupt repetitions, exclamations, and ellipses, suggesting an unstable consciousness governed by obsession rather than reason. The rhythm of the prose mirrors the heartbeat itself, a steady intensification toward confession. The narrator’s ultimate outcry, “Villains! Dissemble no more! I admit the deed!” (Poe 306), signifies the collapse of repression. The psychic boundary between wish and guilt disintegrates; confession becomes the only means to release unbearable internal pressure.

Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” emerges not merely as a Gothic tale of murder but as a psychological allegory of the dream process itself. It stages the transformation of unconscious desire into symbolic action and its inevitable reversal into guilt and exposure. As Freud noted, “in every dream there is at least one place where it is unfathomable, a navel, as it were, that leads into the unknown” (The Interpretation of Dreams 525). In Poe’s story, that “navel” is the beating heart, the point where rational consciousness gives way to the abyss of the unconscious.

CONCLUSION

Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” becomes, under a Freudian reading, far more than a tale of murder and madness; it is a dramatisation of the human mind’s internal conflict between desire and guilt. The narrator’s confession reveals the structure of a dream, where repressed impulses take symbolic form through displacement and condensation. The murder of the old man, ostensibly justified by the narrator’s aversion to the “vulture eye,” is in fact a psychic act, an unconscious wish to silence the paternal superego whose gaze embodies judgment and authority. Yet, in accordance with Freud’s model of the return of the repressed, the fulfilment of this wish immediately reverses into punishment.

The heartbeat, as the story’s central auditory motif, externalises the narrator’s internalised guilt. It becomes the voice of the superego, transforming unconscious anxiety into sensory experience. The narrator’s breakdown at the story’s end underscores Freud’s assertion that “no one who has once formed the repressive mechanism can escape the return of the repressed” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 35). Through this interplay of wish and guilt, Poe anticipates the psychological complexity that Freud would later theorise, the human tendency to enact unconscious desires that ultimately destroy the self.

By aligning the narrator’s confession with the structure of the dream, Poe exposes the fragile boundary between sanity and delusion, consciousness and unconsciousness. The story’s enduring power lies in this recognition that human reason is not opposed to madness but haunted by it. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the dream of fulfilment collapses into a nightmare of guilt, revealing the paradox at the centre of the psyche: that every wish carries within it the seed of its own undoing.

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