

**The Antagonist Character's Conflicted Traits in Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*****Fransiska Dewi Hastuti**

English Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business

University of Widya Dharma Pontianak

Email: *f\_dewi@widyadharm.ac.id***Abstract**

*Conflict, or complication, is a part of plot that plays an important role as a source of problem to be solved in a story. Apparently, since the conflict is mostly related to the main character as the central in the story, revealing the other character's problem to emphasize the existing conflict is intriguing. This study aims to identify and investigate the conflicted nature of the antagonist character in Edgar Allan Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart. Descriptive, qualitative method is used to describe and narrate the analysis based on the data taken from the short story. The data is classified into three categories of the conflicted traits of the protagonist character. It is revealed that the protagonist character, the Old Man, has a conflict within himself and with the antagonist character, the Mad Man. Within himself, his conflict is related to his insecurities about his wealth and his health. His wealth may invite bad people, while his bad health prevents him from protecting himself. These conflicts also cause the Old Man complication with the Mad Man as they create misperceptions that end up with the terrible deed toward the Old Man.*

**Keywords:** *conflicts, antagonist character, characterization, The Tell-Tale Heart*

---

**INTRODUCTION**

Language plays a crucial role in communication between human beings as it transfers the intended meaning from one individual to the other individuals. Purposefully, language can be used in a variety of ways, in written or spoken form, as a means of expression. Literature can be referred to as a medium of expressing imagination with a particular usage of language (Eagleton, 2008). In most genres of literature, the language is utilized differently from other formal writings so that readers can identify them without any difficulty. Among those genres, narratives have the simplest form of writing that can be more easily understood by the readers. The arrangement of words in narratives follow most rules of language with more direct meaning, unlike the genre of poetry which plays with words and symbols more freely.

Narratives, like novels and short stories, contains intrinsic elements such as characters that perform the actions and dialogues, the characterization of the characters, the plot which makes up the story with a sequence of events, the point of view of how the story is told, settings that tell where and when the story happens, and conflicts that contain the unwanted challenges to the characters in the story. The longer a narrative is written, the more complex and complicated the elements in the story are. This suggests that the plot in a short story is highly selective with only one sequence of events, while a novel contains a series of events with more characters and conflicts. Moreover, a short story rapidly establishes the suspense by means of specific techniques and is more suggestive with one specific point of view, describing the action through the eyes of one narrator (Gill, 1995; Klarer, 2004).

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the well-known authors of short stories with a theme of horror or gothic which are told from the first-person point of view. Poe's stories are frequently told in first person, as narrator, since the readers can imagine and experience the feelings of craziness and terror by themselves (Sun, 2015). Especially in one of his famous works, *The Tell-Tale*

*Heart (1843)*, the readers can consider themselves as an oversensitive maniac who kills an innocent old man without any strong motivation, but for the old man's eye and heartbeats. The first-person narrator in this story is the main character or the protagonist. Hence, it is essential to figure out the motives that trigger the main character's deeds from different perspective, that is from the antagonist character in the story.

Many studies have been conducted to analyze *The Tell-Tale Heart*, either focusing on Poe as the author of gothic or horror stories (Sun, 2015) and his response to the controversy of "insanity defense" (Shen, 2008), or discussing the stylistic aspect of the story (Ho, 2010; Abdullah, 2016; Amir, 2018) as well as the psychological aspect of the main character (Alshiban, 2012; Cahyani, 2018). Lastly, Bulu (2018) analyzed the conflict experienced by the main character. These researchers have conducted thorough analysis on *The Tell-Tale Heart* on either the author or the main character and the whole story itself. Thus, it is revealed that the protagonist character in the story is still less analyzed.

This study uses a different angle to analyze the short story that aims to reveal the conflicts experienced by the antagonist character, as the opposition of the main character. Kuiper (2011) elaborates that the promise of eventually solving the conflicts or mysteries may capture the reader's interest. Thus, it is essential to also reveal the antagonist character's conflicts that contribute to the depiction of the protagonist character's feelings and deeds. Besides, it opens an opportunity to enjoy the story from different perspectives.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **Characters and Characterization**

Characters and characterization are inseparable since they complement each other in their analysis. A character in literary work is a fictional figure constructed by the author with particular look, personality, name, action, and thoughts; meanwhile, characterization refers to the literary, linguistic and cultural ways the author creates the character (Gill, 1995; Pope, 2002). Furthermore, authors create their characters in such a way that they differ from one to another in terms of appearance, personality, and behavior. Abrams and Harpham (2014) states that the reader interprets the characters as having moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from the dialogue and the action. In other words, the character is the product of characterization.

In conflicted circumstances, the characters can be divided into protagonist and antagonist characters. The protagonist is the central person in a story and is often referred to as the story's *hero* or *heroine*, while any force opposing the protagonist – whether persons, things, a group of people – refers as antagonist (Abrams & Harpham, 2014; Johnson & Arp, 2017). Thus, the protagonist is considered the main character of the story; it does not matter whether he or she is a good or bad person. Meanwhile, the antagonist is an obstacle that the protagonist must overcome.

A character is often characterized differently from the other characters with distinctive traits. Character's characterization in narratives has alternative methods: *showing* and *telling* (Klarer, 2004; Abrams & Harpham, 2014). In *showing*, or dramatic characterization, the characters are analyzed through their utterances and actions so that the readers can indirectly perceive the characters' motives and personalities based on what they say and do. This indirect characterization also reveals the characters' inner thoughts, feelings, and responses to events. Therefore, the readers make their own interpretation and evaluation based on their own judgment. In contrast, the method of *telling* means explanatory characterization in which the author directly describes or evaluates the characters' motives and personalities. In this method, the narrator is placed in the foreground as a judgmental mediator between the action and the reader.

### Conflicts in Narratives

Conflict, as an element in literary work, helps to build the plot in a story. A story is usually written with conflicts that need to be solved in order to get to the end of the story. Gill (1995) explains that developing a storyline is by creating a problematic situation for the characters and elaborating the ways to solve it. Conflict is a complication which is part of a plot which creates suspense in a story (Klarer, 2004). Therefore, every story has at least one conflict, that may be physical, mental, emotional, or moral, that becomes the problem to solve.

Conflict is the tension or the clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills in a story. Cuddon (2012), Johnson and Arp (2017) divide conflict into several situations. The first situation is between characters or a conflict between a person against another person or a group of people. Next, a conflict between a character and society or environment. These first two situations can be referred to as external conflict. Lastly, a situation in which the character is against their own natures or when the conflict happens within their own self. This is known as internal conflict. A story can contain both kinds of conflict or either one of them.

### METHODOLOGY

The method employed in this study is a descriptive, qualitative method since this method depends on the inductive reasoning aimed at creating meaning and producing rich, descriptive data (Ary, et al., 2014; Leavy, 2017). This method is used to investigate the conflicted antagonist character in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, as opposed to the protagonist character. *The Tell-Tale Heart* tells about the main character's process in murdering his housemate and his conflicted nature regarding his insanity.

The data is collected by reading the whole story several times and numbering each paragraph in orderly. There are a total of 18 paragraphs in the story and since the focus is only the protagonist character, the reading takes only the paragraphs involving the description of this character, which are mostly in paragraph 2 – 11 and paragraph 15. Then the data is classified into three specific groups of data in order to ease the analysis.

In the process of analyzing the data in order to describe the nature of the protagonist character's conflicts, the data is reread and described according to its classification. Each data is numbered and referred to the paragraph it belongs to. Lastly, the conclusion is drawn to reveal the antagonist character's conflicted traits in *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

*The Tell-Tale Heart* is told in the first-person point-of-view where the main character is the Narrator who tells the story. Throughout the story, the pronouns "I", "me", and "my" are utilized in a way that readers will experience the story themselves. Thus, the first-person narrator here, referred to as the Mad Man, is the protagonist character since he is the central in the story. Opposing the Mad Man is the Old Man, as the antagonist character. Besides these two characters, nobody else is shown in the story except for the other outsiders: the neighbor and the police officers.

As the antagonist character, the Old Man plays minor in the narrative and shows up mostly in the first half of the story. Although the role of the Old Man is minor, he contributes to the feelings and deeds of the main character so much that it causes his death. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the characterization of the Old Man is mostly done indirectly from the point of view of the first-person narrator. This character is first introduced by the narrator in the second paragraph: "*I loved the old man*". Furthermore, he is characterized as follows:

- (1) *For his gold I had no desire.* (Par. 2)
- (2) *He had the eye of a vulture --a pale blue eye, with a film over it.* (Par. 2)

- (3) ... he lay upon his bed. (Par. 3)  
(4) His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, ... (Par. 4)  
(5) I saw it with perfect distinctness --all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; (Par. 9)  
(6) I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. (Par. 15)

The evidence above reveals the Old Man's appearance and condition. Presenting what a character looks like helps the author to control the responses of the reader to a certain degree, like the inner world of the character's personality (Gill, 1995). Firstly, he is a wealthy old man, as seen in (1)'s *gold* and (6)'s *treasures* of his. The second condition is about his appearance, especially his unusual eye which is covered with a film, as seen in (2), or veil in (5). It reveals that this old man has trouble on one of his eyes due to his old age or a certain kind of disease. Instead of letting it be, he hides it with a particular eye cover. Lastly, this old man stays in his bed throughout the story. He is told to lay upon his bed (3) in a very dark room (4). Staying in his bed implies that this man is unable to move around freely because of his being old or having a disease. Yet, knowing that he might get rid of his disease with his money, his staying in bed must be because of his old age. These descriptions conclude that the bed-ridden old man has a troubled eye, yet possesses a fortune.

The descriptions of the Old Man as the antagonist character infer the conflicts that he must suffer. Overall, the conflicts happen within the Old Man himself, that involves the circumstances of his wealth and health. Besides, it also involves the protagonist character in the story.

### 1. The Old Man versus his wealth

Gill (1995) points out that the character's personality is also established by the way in which the character acts or reacts to even a slight event. As stated in the characterization, the Old Man possessed gold that he treasured. Consequently, he felt insecure that his treasures were wanted by bad people. He stayed in his bedroom which was so dark, as stated in (4), because of his fear of robbers who might come unannounced to rob his gold, as in (7) below.

- (7) ... (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) (Par. 4)  
(8) when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the oldman sprang up in bed, crying out "Who's there?" (Par. 5)

Moreover, data (8) reveals that the Old Man was cautious of his surroundings that he was aware of even little noise that he heard even though he was asleep. He quickly suspected that someone was around, trying to get into his treasures. Regarding his being suspicious on every little thing as a threat to his wealth, this old man found a way to entertain and comfort himself by having positive remarks, as shown in the evidence below.

- (9) His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself --"It is nothing but the wind in the chimney --it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. (Par. 7)

Nonetheless, the Old Man was still unable to secure his feeling from the dreadful idea that his wealth might invite the bad people to threaten his life for his gold as he found that his own comforting plan was useless. He had to be really careful about his surroundings in order to protect his gold. Because of this reason, this old man complicate himself with his wary action and behavior. Thus, it can be concluded that the Old Man has an internal conflict in which his own wealth causes him to feel insecure and suspicious all the time.

## 2. The Old Man versus his health

The protagonist in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the Mad Man, is considered as the caretaker of the Old Man as he constantly gets into the old man's chamber to care for him. His relationship with the old man is as the employee and employer, not relation by blood as he refers the old man simply by the Old Man. Moreover, the Mad Man mentioned that he went to work, as in (10), and was really kind to the old man prior to his death.

(10)... *I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him.* (Par. 3)

(11)... *when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night.* (Par. 3)

The Mad Man cared for the Old Man by attending him routinely in his bedroom and asking for his condition, as shown in (11). This signifies that the Old Man was unable to get out of his bed anymore to do the activities outside his bedroom, even out of his bed. His condition immobilized him that it triggered his insecurity more that he could not defend himself once someone was trying to attack him to get to his gold.

The other problem that the Old Man has related to his health is related to one of his eyes. Data (2) and (5) above reveal that this old man's eye was veiled with a thin layer of plastic or other material. It might be because one of his eyes was sensitive to light that he put a film over it. Because of this limitation on his sight, the Old Man was wary on his surroundings. To conclude, having bad health condition is the Old Man's internal conflict since he cannot protect himself and his gold from people with ulterior motive.

## 3. The Old Man versus the Mad Man

The characters fully involved in *The Tell-Tale Heart* are mostly the main character and the antagonist one. Nobody else is seen in the first half of the story except for these two characters. The other minor characters are outsiders: the neighbor and the police officers, who are first mentioned in Paragraph 14.

The Old Man and the Mad Man basically had good relationship since the latter admitted that he loved the Old Man who had never wronged and insulted him. Moreover, he emphasized that he did not want the Old Man's gold, as can be seen in (12) below.

(12)*I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire.* (Par. 3)

The evidence above reveals that money was not the motive in which the Mad Man killed the Old Man. The Mad Man would not have waited for eight nights to conduct the crime in order to get the Old Man's money. However, although he treated the Old Man kindly, the Old Man's feeling of insecurity as possessing gold kept making him suspicious to everyone, including the Mad Man. Hence, his action or behavior might be misinterpreted by the other party.

The first misinterpretation is related to the Old Man's eye. The Mad Man explained that the terrible eye sent him chilled to his bone, as in (5) above. He felt that the eye was really troublesome whenever it was open and looked at him, as if he were a bad person who wanted to do bad things to the Old Man. This became the first motive that the Mad Man admitted for killing the Old Man in the story, as shown in (13) below. By killing the Old Man, the Mad Man would be able to escape from the dreadful eye.

(13)*Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees --very gradually --I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.* (Par. 2)

(14)... *for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye* (Par. 3)

(15)*His eye would trouble me no more.* (Par. 11)

Data (14) supports the reason that the Old Man did not wish to possess the Old Man's money by killing him, but because of the eye. When the Old Man was finally dead, the Mad Man was relieved that he would not any problem anymore (15). This case shows that the Mad Man misconstrued the Old Man's eye movement as accusing him of doing bad things. What really happened was that the Old Man was being careful of his surroundings. Besides, he had a problem with his eye that he had to have it covered, with no intention of making it fearful for other people.

Besides the terrible eye, the other misconception is related to the Old Man's heartbeat. The Mad Man conveyed that he had an over-acuteness of hearing senses so he could hear the beating of the Old Man's heart, which was really disturbing (16). He thought that the Old Man was in a deep terror that he heard the heart beat quicker and louder, as shown in (17) and (18). This irritating heartbeat became the second motive in which the Mad Man finally murdered the Old Man (19).

(16) *It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.* (Par. 10)

(17) *Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme!* (Par. 11)

(18) *But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst.* (Par. 11)

(19) *But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead.* (Par. 11)

From the start of the story, the Mad Man reminded the reader that he was not mad, that he had sharp sense of hearing. His trying to convince the reader was his way of defending himself because he was actually insane and had normal hearing. For this reason, it is clear that it was not the Old Man's heartbeat that he heard, but his own. Due to this misconception, the Old Man must suffer from the Mad Man silent accusation.

Hence, it can be concluded that the conflict between the Old Man, as the antagonist character, and the Mad Man, as the protagonist, is due to the misunderstanding that the Mad Man has toward the Old Man.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that the antagonist character, the Old Man, in *The Tell-Tale Heart* has conflicted traits that can reveal the motives of his death by the protagonist character, the Mad Man. The conflicts are both internal and external. The internal conflicts are related to his wealth and his health. The Old Man was insecure that his bad health prevented him from protecting himself and his gold from bad people. This old man was a wealthy person, but he must stay in bed because of his condition and one of his eyes was not normal.

The external conflict is between the Old Man and the Mad Man that creates misunderstandings related to the Old Man's eye and heartbeat. Because of these misunderstandings, the Old Man must lose his life. Thus, there is connection between the conflict within the Old Man himself and the conflict that he has with the Mad Man.

## REFERENCES

- Abdullah, O. N. (2016). *A study of narrative techniques in selected short stories of Ernest Hemingway and Edgar Allan Poe* (Doctoral dissertation, Middle East University).
- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. (2014). *A glossary of literary terms*. Cengage learning.

- 
- Alshiban, A. S. (2012). Sadism, fantasy, and the compulsion to kill in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 2(7), 703-722.
- Amir, S. (2018). Stylistic analysis of the short story 'The Tell-Tale Heart' by Edgar Allan Poe. *Angloamericanae Journal*, 3(1), 18-28.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Sorenson, C., and Walker, D. A. (2014). *Introduction to research in education (9th ed.)*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Bulu, M. (2018). Conflict analysis of the main characters in short stories by Edgar Allan Poe. *PIONEER: Journal of Language and Literature*, 10(1), 1-12.
- Cahyani, F. T. (2018). *An analysis of paranoia as portrayed by the murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart" short story written by Edgar Allan Poe* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Muhammadiyah Malang).
- Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *A dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Eagleton, T. (2008). *Literary theory: An introduction*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Gill, R. (1995). *Mastering English literature*. Macmillan Press LTD.
- Ho, Y. F. (2010). Stylistics and its relevance to the study of literature: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" as an illustration. *師大學報: 語言與文學類*, 55(2), 137-157.
- Johnson, G., & Arp, T. R. (2015). *Perrine's literature: Structure, sound, and sense*. Cengage Learning.
- Klarer, M. (2004). *An introduction to literary studies*. Routledge.
- Kuiper, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Prose: Literary terms and concepts*. Britannica Educational Publishing.
- Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. The Guilford Press.
- Pope, R. (2002). *The English studies book: An introduction to language, literature, and culture, 2nd Ed.* Routledge.
- Shen, D. (2008). Edgar Allan Poe's Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of "The Tell-Tale Heart". *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 63(3), 321-345.
- Sun, C. (2015). Horror from the Soul--Gothic Style in Allan Poe's Horror Fictions. *English Language Teaching*, 8(5), 94-99.