

A Life Full of Emptiness: An Interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*

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Abstract

This research paper deals with the aspect of emptiness in life. Sometimes people find a type of emotional vacuum in their lives. They attempt to get rid of this nothingness by making choices which are irrational. This irrationality comes due to the emptiness which dominates the emotions and brain ceases to think logically. This happens in the short story analyzed in this research. An old man dies a tragic death with no fault of his own

Key Words: emptiness, irrational, meaninglessness

Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer. He was born on 7 October 1849 and died on 19 January 1809. He wrote short stories and poems. He was also a literary critic. His notable short stories include *The Black Cat*, *Silence-A Fable*, *The Fall of the House of the Usher etc.* He does not believe in reforming society through his literature. His literature does not give a very clear meaning in an obvious manner. His work has the element of one surface meaning and one hidden meaning which is the characteristic trait of his stories and poems.

The main character is actually depicted as the antagonistic force in the story. He is obsessed with an old man. He cannot withstand the eye of the old man. He calls it a vulture eye. He wants to get rid of that eye as soon as possible. He brutally murders the old man. The brutal intentions are depicted in the speech of the narrator:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me.

He had never given me an insult. For his gold, I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!

He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. 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. (The Tell-Tale Heart)

Edgar Allan Poe has depicted a character which is difficult for the reader to judge whether it is male or female. He has used the personal pronoun 'I' for the narrator. The character shows highly complex behaviour. In this research, the word 'He' for the narrator is used only for convenience. The urge to kill an old man for a silly reason signifies that life of the narrator of the story has a void, which dominates the emotion of the antagonist. He does not realize what he is doing. He is finding silly reasons to kill the old man. The author does not give any idea about the background of the narrator. The starting of the story gives an idea of an insane person who is irrational in approach and dangerous in the deeds.

TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (The Tell-Tale Heart)

After reading the story it is observed that the life of the narrator is full of nothingness. There seems to be no aim and purpose of the life of the narrator. The narrator does not seem to have a happy family and social life. That is the reason he or she thinks of committing such a heinous murder. It seems that the narrator has nothing worthwhile to do in his or her life. So in order to give some meaning to life, this drastic step has been taken by the narrator which in any case cannot be justified. The narrator's life is going in a meaningless direction. Now the question here is what the fault of this old man is. The answer is 'nothing'. The old man has to suffer from no fault of his own due to this irrational behaviour of the universe which seem to conspire against him. He suffers because somebody is obsessed with his eye.

And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always

closed, and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. (The Tell-Tale Heart)

This emptiness which results in the meaninglessness of life is also visible in the works of Franz Kafka. His characters suffer from no fault of their own. The old man becomes the victim of whims and fancies of the narrator. His plight is similar to the protagonist of *The Trial* written by Kafka where Joseph K suffers without any fault. The universe seems to behave in an irrational manner where people like Joseph K or the old man in *The Tell-Tale Heart* pay the price of this irrationality with their lives.

The narrator seems to be in the search of finding the meaning of life but irrationally the search ends with the murder of the innocent old man. This is the result of the meaninglessness of life which is responsible for the abnormal bent of mind of the narrator. This life full of emptiness dominates the brain of the narrator and attacks the thinking ability. He does not feel nervous at the arrival of the police. He boldly admits that in the story.

I smiled,—for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim. (The Tell-Tale Heart)

When the police search the dead body of the old man the narrator tells them that they are sitting on the dead body of the old man. In this way, they come to know who the murderer is. This emptiness in life and meaninglessness of existence goad the narrator to kill the innocent old man. The narrator who is now emancipated from the obsession of the evil eye falls in the trap of the heart that seems to be ringing loudly in the ears. Being unable to bear the sound which is only audible to the narrator the deed is admitted in front of the cops. “Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!”(The Tell-Tale Heart)

The character in the story is free to have a choice but the consequences of irrational choice are disastrous. The reason behind this irrational choice is the inherent emptiness in the life of humans. The

narrator is suffering from a disease called life full of emptiness and he or she does blunders with this irrational approach in this equally irrational universe. As Sartre observes

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees he is not definable, it is because, to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (28)

This research has found that the story *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a saga of life full of emptiness. This emptiness has a vicious circle in the society and it spreads from one individual to another individual. The narrator is affected by this emptiness and meaninglessness in the life which results in the abnormal behaviour and the innocent old man dies a tragic death. This research also concludes that choice is a very important aspect of life and people can make their life meaningful by choosing their course of action carefully so as to become the responsible citizens of the country.



Work Cited

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Existentialism is Humanism*. Translated by Philip Marier, Buttler and Tanner, 1960.