

Walsbergerová, Tereza

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**“MAKING A MOCKERY OF HORROR”:  
THE DOUBLE-CROSSING PARANOIA OF E. A. POE’S  
*THE TELL-TALE HEART* AND *THE BLACK CAT***

*Tereza Walsbergerová*

**Abstract**

Although E. A. Poe is mainly celebrated as the forefather of horror and master of the Gothic, one of the most significant facets of his work has been consistently overlooked and doubted by the majority of Poe scholarship – his humorist tendencies. Poe’s fondness for folly and his simultaneous desire to test and school American society not only manifested in the way he presented himself in public but also influenced his works, as some agree that he often used humor in his texts to subvert established conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American literary scene. One of such conventions – the paranoid style, which is, according to a theory formulated by Richard Hofstadter, tied to the very birth of the American nation – becomes the target of Poe’s satire in some of his most prominent short stories. This paper analyses two Poe stories that explicitly utilize the paranoid style – *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat* – proposing a reading that sees Poe’s humorist strategies as “double-crossing” in that they satirize paranoia both as a pathology and as a mode of writing and reading.

**Keywords**

E. A. Poe, paranoia, the paranoid style, irony, satire, Gothic fiction, 19<sup>th</sup> century American fiction, incongruity theory, the uncanny

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## **1. Introduction**

Although Edgar Allan Poe is typically celebrated as the master and forefather of horror, many argue that he spent a considerable amount of time injecting his stories with a dose of humorous irony. A number of scholars agree that Poe did this to subvert established conventions of 19<sup>th</sup> century literary scene which he felt were overflowing with clichés and uninspired ideas. Indeed, there are some who consider Poe a satirical author – one who, according to Dennis V. Eddings, reveled in “testing” his audience and wished to put a stop to literary practices that he felt were

## “Making a Mockery of Horror”

“stultifying the imagination” (Eddings 1983, ix). This view of Poe’s literary goals is consistent with Robert T. Tally Jr. who sees him as an underminer of “the project of American Studies” (Tally 2014, 2). Tally emphasizes the playfulness of Poe’s works and identifies some of the specific targets of his satire as transcendentalism, Platonism, and the Gothic. One of the Gothic elements Poe targets in a number of his short stories – as I argue in this paper – is paranoia.

Paranoia is primarily understood as a psychological condition “characterized by persistent delusions” (VandenBos 2015, 759). Though it can take on many different forms in different literary contexts, its presence within the Gothic genre is natural as it is often connected to traumas, obsessions, and sexual repressions. It can also be seen as a specific style or a mode of writing and interpretation – particularly in connection with the history of American political culture. The term “paranoid style” was coined in the 1990s by Richard Hofstadter in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1996) where he characterizes it by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter 1996, 3). Hofstadter makes a clear distinction between clinical paranoia and paranoid style in his essay, claiming that the paranoid style should be understood as “a recurring mode of expression” (ibid., 6) rather than a pathology. Although Hofstadter admits that America has “no monopoly of the gift for paranoid improvisation” (ibid., 6), citing the hysterical reaction of European media to the assassination of JFK as an example, his work sees America as the natural environment for the development of the paranoid style. In *Reading the Text that Isn’t There: Paranoia in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (2005), which focuses on the synthesis of 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic and the American paranoid style, Mike Lee Davis also subscribes to the claim that both paranoia and the Gothic are inherent parts of American literary history. Davis examines this synthesis through the analysis of works by Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain, devoting an entire chapter to Twain’s hoaxing. He argues that in many of his works – e.g. *A Double-Barrelled Detective Story* – Twain “invokes, parodies, and modifies the paranoid perspective as an interpretive mode” (Davis 2005, 94), which strongly indicates that the paranoid style is a mode of writing and reading that has been continuously on the minds of American authors to such a degree that they felt compelled to respond to it.

It makes sense that Poe – who is often considered one of the first “truly American” authors, but also – similarly to Twain – one of the first “tricksters” of American literature – would want to participate in these practices by satirizing any and all forms of paranoia, especially in connection with the Gothic. His satire of paranoia and the paranoid style is particularly visible in his two short stories *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*, which are both narrated from the point of view of a

pathological paranoiac. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the unnamed narrator suffers from a paranoid obsession which initially concerns an old man's eye and subsequently his "beating" heart. Generally speaking, it is a story of a cold-blooded murder that utilizes suspense to induce fear within its reader. Similarly, the unnamed narrator of *The Black Cat* suffers from a paranoid obsession concerning a pet. It is also a story of alcohol abuse and a cold-blooded homicide as the narrator ends up murdering not only his cat, but also his wife whom he buries in the wall in the basement. While both texts can, and certainly have been, read as traditional straightforward horror stories with possible allegorical subtexts, there are many markers of humorous irony that imply Poe's possible intentions of satirizing paranoia and the paranoid style and simultaneously testing his readers who are performing a paranoid reading of the stories. Building on Noël Carroll's theory of horror and humor, the incongruity theory, and Linda Hutcheon's writings on irony, I argue that Poe's writing in these two stories both satirizes paranoia and tests his readers by putting the protagonists into incongruous situations.

## 2. The incongruous and the uncanny

The main argument of Noël Carroll's article "Horror and Humor" (1999) asserts that there is a thin line between horror and incongruous humor. Carroll explains his theory in relation to the traditional monsters of the horror genre, such as the Frankenstein monster, yet I believe his theory can be applied to paranoia as well, as paranoia – just like monsters – is in a sense connected to the fear of the unknown. The reason I do not believe Carroll's theory fully applies to paranoia is because paranoid narratives are, in terms of fear, often less straightforward and more ambiguous than simple horror stories, especially those emerging after WWII and during the Cold War Era in the United States (although Poe's treatment of paranoia, which is less political and more connected to the Gothic, is slightly more straightforward). Carroll points out the similar mechanics of theories of horror and humor in his article. The prime example of this is the concept of the uncanny and the incongruity theory (Carroll 1999, 146), which are both based on the interaction of juxtaposing elements. While the uncanny – first proposed as a concept by F. W. J. Schelling in 1835 and further developed by Ernst Jentsch and, more significantly, by Sigmund Freud in 1919 – refers to the clash of the strange and the familiar, the incongruity theory – currently the dominant theory of laughter in humor studies – refers to a diversion from "learned mental patterns" (Morreall 2009, 11), which usually appears in the form of contradictions. The similarities of the two concepts explain why clowns, for example, can be seen as amusing by some and horrifying by others.

## “Making a Mockery of Horror”

The same is true of the paranoia in *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat* as both stories contain a number of juxtaposed elements. *The Tell-Tale Heart* begins with the narrator classifying themselves<sup>1</sup> as “nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous” (Poe 1843b, par. 1) and even admitting to suffering from an unnamed illness although they insist that they are definitely not insane. Yet, what follows is a recounting of events so absurd and ludicrous that it becomes clear the narrator’s opening words are nothing but a delusion. The incongruous humor is driven by Poe’s choice of having the narrator repeat phrases that stress how calm, collected, clever, and healthy they are, while the narrative itself suggests the exact opposite. This kind of incongruous repetition appears frequently in the story as the narrator tries to convince the reader of their sanity and superiority.

### 3. The irony of self-incrimination

The fact that the amount of time between the narrator’s identification of the object of their obsession – the old man’s “evil eye” – and their resolution to kill the old man in order to rid themselves of the eye fits into the space of a short paragraph also points to irony. The narrator says: “Whenever [the eye] 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”. (ibid. para. 2) The absolute impracticality of the narrator’s solution – to rid himself of the object of his paranoia, an eye, through a cold-blooded murder of an entire person – then only emphasizes the ludicrousness of the scene. The narrative further follows this pattern with the description of the narrator thrusting their head into the old man’s bedroom. The narrator says: “It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening”. (ibid., para. 3) Here, Poe plays with time for comedic purposes, using exaggeration to emphasize the absurdity of the moment, as the image of the narrator slowly moving their head into the room for an hour clashes with the idea of murder as a fast and violent endeavor. The extent of the narrator’s paranoia concerning the old man’s eye then becomes clear in the same paragraph when the narrator reveals that this thrusting of the head and looking at the old man while he sleeps has actually been taking place every night at twelve o’clock for eight days. The particular piece of information about the precise time is once again both incongruous and ironic as Poe is both having the narrator perform an absurd task every day at the exact same time and ridiculing the Gothic trope of the midnight hour.

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using gender-neutral language when referring to the unnamed narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” as we never find out who they are.

Poe's illustration of this kind of paranoid obsession can also be interpreted as a ridicule of his own readership who have become obsessed with reading stories containing the clichéd paranoid style. As the object of the narrator's paranoia changes from the old man's eye to the beating of the old man's heart, the narrator resolves to act quickly. The murder itself is then another example of Poe's ridicule of the Gothic. Despite the fact that the narrator is worried about the neighbors overhearing the man's heartbeat – the first thing they do as they enter the old man's room is yell loudly, completely undermining their own logic. The cold calmness with which the narrator deals with the old man's dead corpse is then also incongruous, as is the narrator's insistence upon their own cunningness. This very insistence foreshadows the narrator's inevitable downfall when the police come knocking at the door and the narrator decides to have everybody sit upon the very floorboards where they had buried the old man as opposed to getting them out of the house as soon as possible to avoid being caught. The final scene of the story finds the narrator immersed so deeply within the paranoia, s/he starts acting strangely, talking with a heightened voice and pacing the floor: all tell-tale signs of guilt. Ironically, the narrator's paranoia ends up incriminating him/her in a crime which has been caused by the very same paranoia.

The ironic humor of *The Black Cat* is considerably subtler than the humor of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, which does not, however, mean that the paranoia in the story is any less comical. The unnamed narrator of *The Black Cat* also opens the story by proclaiming his sanity. He then says that the tale he is about to reveal is “a series of mere household events” (Poe 1843a, para. 1) – a claim that is followed by a story of an alcoholic committing two murders, the very opposite of this. Furthermore, even though the narrator is psychologically terrorized by the image of the cat he has strung up, his decision that the best way to deal with his paranoia is to replace his dead pet with a similar-looking cat is another example of Poe's use of humorous irony in the story. The fact that the narrator's replacement cat – who becomes the object of his paranoid obsession – will not stop following him around, is perhaps the most incongruously comical part of the story. He says: “Neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of Rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face . . .” (ibid., para. 20). Even though the man is completely terrified of the creature, the way in which Poe describes the cat's behavior – one that is typical of most household cats – in truth ridicules the man's paranoid point of view. Furthermore, while in a straightforward horror tale, calling a monster the thing would evoke feelings of terror (a particularly good example of that is Stephen King's *It*), here it fuels the incongruous comedy of the moment. “The thing” is a cat, after all, and cats breathing into people's faces is typically considered amusing.

## “Making a Mockery of Horror”

The almost-slapstick scene in which the narrator accidentally kills his wife is a natural consequence of his absurd paranoia. This is where *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* become almost identical as both narrators turn into clowns of sorts who, while trying to do everything in their power not to be caught red-handed, ironically end up doing things that ultimately incriminate them. While trying to decide what to do with his dead wife’s corpse, the unnamed narrator briefly entertains the idea of “packing it in a box, as if merchandize” and “getting the porter to take it from the house” (ibid., para. 23). The possibility of the incongruous humor of this scene is clear, as the idea of a dead body being treated as a regular package by an unwitting postman can be read as either uncanny or amusing. While the trope of using the postal service to smuggle items in and out of places was certainly not invented by Poe, the image of the narrator neatly packing his wife’s body parts into a box intended for other kinds of items is incongruous and can be interpreted as humorous.

The narrator’s decision to wall the body up in the basement then carries the most irony as it later comes to haunt him when the police appear in his house four days after the murder takes place. The absolute lack of paranoia in this part of the story is just as significant as its presence at the beginning. First, the narrator is actually shocked when the police come, even though it is clear that his wife has been missing for four days. Second, when the police do not find anything and are ready to leave the narrator’s house, instead of seeing them out, he opts to keep them in the basement. This, again, is another example of the narrator doing the opposite of what he should be doing, which fuels the comedy of the story. Although most scholars interpret the accidentally-buried cat’s cry as the man’s guilty conscience which ultimately forces him to incriminate himself, I would argue that Poe has the man ultimately incriminate himself for the irony of the moment. Why else would the narrator say something as ironic as: “By the by, gentlemen this—this is a very well constructed house” (ibid., para. 28) to the police and actually rap with his cane at the very spot where he buried his wife? Ultimately, walling up the cat within the tomb along with the corpse is ironic, as the narrator becomes incriminated because of the object of his obsessive paranoia itself.

#### **4. The double-crossing paranoia**

Although I have demonstrated the comedy of both stories in the examples above, the ultimate question still stands – what actually determines whether we laugh or shudder in fear upon reading stories such as these two? Carroll claims that “[o]n the map of mental states, horror and incongruity amusement are adjacent and partially overlapping regions” (Carroll 1999, 157) and that the distinction between our reaction in terms of genuine horror or amusement is dependent on the existence or absence of threat (ibid., 156). In other words, once we take away the threat linked to

the monster, the monster becomes incongruous and thus amusing. This is not, however, true of paranoid narratives as they straddle the line between horror and incongruity amusement. Although authors such as Poe subvert the paranoid by making it incongruous, the threat never fully goes away and so the reader ends up oscillating between horror and laughter. While we may laugh at the unnamed narrator of the *Tell-Tale Heart* thrusting their head into the door for an entire hour, the fact that they end up committing a violent murder remains, and so the state of laughter can never become our final destination. This could possibly be Poe's intention, as it aligns well with the hoaxing, testing, and tricking of readers he is said to have enjoyed so much.

In her study *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), Linda Hutcheon stresses that irony is the product of interpretation rather than communication. Simply put, according to her theory, whether we laugh or not may actually depend on whether we want to laugh rather than on whether Poe wants us to laugh. Hutcheon claims that "[e]ven if an ironist intends an irony to be interpreted in an oppositional framework, there is no guarantee that this subversive intent will be realized" (Hutcheon 1994, 15). In other words, there is ultimately no way to objectively classify something as ironic or subversive. Again, I want to argue that that is exactly what Poe's stories demonstrate in terms of horror and humor; there is no answer; there is only the reader caught in a never-ending cycle of paranoid reading. In other words, the mere fact that we are not sure whether we should be laughing or not is a part of Poe's trick. Either might turn out to be a trap, which is, ultimately, the essence of Poe's satirical genius.

Poe's stories allude to this double-crossing nature of his paranoid narrative. For example, at the beginning of *The Black Cat*, the narrator mentions that "some intellect may be found which will reduce [his] phantasm to the common place" (Poe 1843a, para. 1), clearly talking to the kind of reader who refuses to see the irony within the tale. Another example of this kind of "meta-text" appears mid-way through the story, when the narrator claims that "[the cat] followed [his] footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend" (ibid., para. 18). Poe is basically mocking the reader here for both under- and over-reading the text. The choice of having the narrator talk to the reader and call the reader out on their own paranoia is poignant, as these examples clearly demonstrate. There are, additionally, other instances of subtext within the stories which seem to be referring to the author himself. At the end of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator says accusingly about the three policemen who come to investigate his house, "they knew! They were making a mockery of my horror!" (Poe 1843b, para. 17). In this instance, it is indeed Poe who is making a mockery of the narrator's paranoia while



at the same time having the narrator recognize the reader’s interpretation. He is mocking everyone. The narrator’s crazy chuckles throughout the story can therefore also be interpreted as the author laughing at the audience who have fallen into the trap of irony.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat* typically do not appear in collections of humorous short stories written by E. A. Poe (e.g. the collection *Humorous Tales* published by the University of Adelaide which includes texts such as *The Duc De L’Omelette* (1832) and *The Devil in the Belfry* [1839]), this paper has hopefully demonstrated that they can be interpreted as satires nonetheless. In particular, they represent Poe’s mockery of the paranoid style, which can be included among the multitudes of clichés of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American literary scene. Both narratives subvert elements of paranoia through incongruous humor as both unnamed narrators–paranoiacs completely fail at being the culprits and end up falling into the trap of their own paranoias. *The Tell-Tale Heart* uses, amongst other strategies, exaggeration to indicate that the narrative has been pushed to the realm of comical absurdity by having the unnamed narrator spend an entire hour thrusting their head into a doorway – fueled by their paranoia concerning an old man’s eye, while *The Black Cat* uses a kind of slapstick comedy to highlight the absurdity of the narrator’s paranoia concerning a household pet.

Although humor is clearly present in both texts, neither story can be proclaimed fully comedic as they both straddle the line between the incongruous and the uncanny. This ambiguity in terms of horror and humor leaves the readers uncertain whether they should laugh or be afraid, which seems to be intentional on Poe’s part given his documented fondness for mockery and his tendency to challenge and test a readership which may have fallen victim to literary clichés such as the paranoid style. The acknowledgement (and prompting) of the readers in the form of comments which accuse them of either (or both) over-interpreting or under-interpreting the text then only increases that ambiguity. Poe’s mastery of literary trickery goes beyond the readership, since it could even be argued that literary critics, and Poe scholars in particular, may also have fallen into the trap of Poe’s double-crossing paranoia, seeing as the very act of literary analysis can be classified as a kind of paranoid reading. Ultimately, the ungraspability of the extent of Poe’s irony concerning paranoia becomes an irony in itself.

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Tereza Walsbergerová has a Bachelor's Degree in Theory of Interactive Media and Master's Degree in English Language and Literature from Masaryk University. She is currently a PhD candidate at MU and writes her dissertation project on comedic takes on paranoia in American postmodern fiction. Her other research interests include animal studies and pop cultural phenomena. In 2018, she was awarded the William J. Hlavinka Fellowship at Texas A&M University where she spent one year studying and working as a graduate assistant at the Department of English. Tereza's academic work was published in the *European Journal of Humour Research* and she presented papers at conferences in Texas, Washington D. C., Estonia, Austria, and the Czech Republic.



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