

# Illustrating Violence, Mystery and Desolation: Comparing Poe's Storytelling and Hinds' Rendering of "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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**Abstract** – Comics might be defined as a hybrid word and image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. To appreciate graphic narratives, we need to go beyond the set of rules and re-examine the categories of narratives. Popularly known as "graphic novels", these illustrations cannot be ignored as an innovative narrative form. A significant difference between children's comics and graphic novels is that the latter often considered as a more mature counterpart carrying the weight and complexity of a prose narrative; or otherwise they are pictorial representations intended to be enjoyed by adults that also include adaptations of classical verbal narratives. In this paper, I stress on the diversification of narrative corpus and appreciate the graphic adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Gareth Hinds. Hinds' graphic narration of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a part of the 2017 graphic novel adaptation entitled *Poe: Stories and Poems* by Candlewick Press, Massachusetts. Hinds' illustrations go hand in hand with the gothic tone of the original text, from the symbols of death to the twisted anguished faces. The criminal in the story has executed a horrible crime with rational precision. At the same time he discloses a deep psychological confusion; he lacks any normal motivation for the murder. His reasoning tends to convict him of madness. Hinds' Illustrations portray a slow descent into loss of mind and paranoia. Hinds does not dulcorate the blood and butchery in these stories and poems; each haunting sequence is full of tension and dread. The graphic novel is a great introduction to Poe's work. His adaptation depends heavily on the original language of the text while considering the modern reader in mind.

**Keywords:** Adaptation Studies, Graphic Novel, Gothic Fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, Gareth Hinds

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Since its formation in the 1950s, an adaptation study has struggled to achieve academic respectability till the early decade of this century. A renewed interest in this field occurred after the publication of works by Robert Stam, Linda Hutcheon, and Thomas Leitch between 2005 and 2007. Reorient it from the fidelity discourse, they treat adaptations as expanded forms of intertextuality. Contemporary critics who embrace literature as the parameter for their readings find themselves struggling with it. Adaptations from previously existing source materials act as cultural translations and they operate through entangled intertexts of narrative meaning in various genres across cultures and languages.

For Thomas Leitch, "adaptation theory has remained tangential to the thrust of film study," resulting in a discipline that "has been marginalized because it wishes to be" ("Twelve Fallacies" 149, 168). Adaptation Theory theorizes a story's "process of mutation or adjustment, through adaptation, to a particular cultural environment." Linda Hutcheon put forward a term "cultural transmission" as "analogous to genetic transmission", following Darwin's theory of evolution. Instead of genes, there are "memes", that

are replicators that enable a text to compete for survival in the "meme pool." The fittest stories undergo 'cultural selection' and not only survive but also flourish (Hutcheon, 31-32).

Scholarship on comics or graphic narratives is gaining attraction in socio-cultural studies. Comics might be defined as "a hybrid word and image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially" (Chute, 452). Following Hutcheon's remark, I can say genres are mutating, taking brand new forms of storytelling in today's cultural landscape. From children's literature to classics, graphic narrative genre produces a wide variety of adaptations as comic books, Japanese Manga etc. It is Richard Kyle who coined the term "graphic story" and "graphic novel" to describe the "artistically serious comic book strip" (Kyle, 3-4).

A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics. The term 'novel' here implies lengthy narration but the term 'graphic narrative' accommodates both fiction and non-fiction. The later nineteenth century comic strips ranged from

one page to several pages, but by 1930s comic books emerged typically of thirty two pages long containing collection of stories, or one story illustration, or series. Comics differ from the cartoon since cartoons are single-panel images and comics uses sequential panel images. Comics usually unfold over multiple frames, carries a different narrative push than a cartoon does (454). Hence graphic novels have emerged as a popular genre, recreating classics as well as exclusive illustrations, among modern readers.

Poe as a gothic creator shares a peculiar dark sensitivity, exploring criminality, monstrosity and violence that influenced other artists and writers. These manifestations of horror in art can be seen as a reaction to the violence and human perversity prevalent in society. Poe has taken the dark side of human psyche in his art where terror and evil can be felt as sublime. Since death marks the end of everything, Poe reveals in many of his short stories that art can kill and destroy itself and the artist. Many of the murders in Poe's short stories are artists in the sense that they are masters in the art of murder and their perverse art destroy themselves. The murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is such an artist who destroys himself at the peak of his creativity.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is an ambiguous investigation of a man's paranoia. Like the hysteric, hyper-sensitive Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher", the murderer here is a "very dreadfully nervous" type. His sensitivities allow him to hear all things in the heaven and in the earth, and many things in hell. His hypersensitivity becomes the ultimate cause of his obsession with the old man's pale blue eye, which made up his mind to rid himself of the eye forever. Without any real motivation other than his obsession, he decides to take the life of the old man. He knows that the readers may fancy him mad; but he says he is not mad but wise, and wisely proceeded to kill the old man. The murderer attempts to rationalize his irrational behaviour.

The murderer watches over the old man for seven consecutive nights and on the eighth night he decides to commit the crime. When he says "I fairly chuckled at the idea," (Carol, 93) the readers get the picture of a highly disturbed personality. Like most of the stories of Poe, here too, the action takes place in a closed surrounding, in the confines of the old man's bedroom. When the old man understood the presence of someone in the room, he moans, a "low stifled sounds that arose from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe." (93) The murderer can hear "a low, dull, quick sound", the beating of the old man's heart. His moans and heartbeat heighten the terror of the story. But in his overexcitement, narrator cannot distinguish whether it is the old man's heartbeat or his.

In his paranoia, the murderer hears the increasing sound of heartbeat, "beating... louder, louder". He

dragsthe old man to the floor, pulls the heavy bed over him and for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound and ceased. He dismembered the old man with a wild laughter denoting the loss of his rational faculties. After cleaning up, the narrator carefully removes the planks from the floor in the old man's room and places all the parts of the body under the floor. It is 4 AM and the doorbell rings; police comes to investigate some shrieks. He receives them with a light heart and let the police thoroughly search the entire house. Then he makes the police sit the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim. The officers are convinced but suddenly the narrator hear a sound, "a low, dull quick sound", that is becoming louder and louder, becomes intolerable; he cannot stand the psychological pressure any longer and confesses the crime and ask them to uncover the mystery by tearing up the planks.

Poe's characterization of this narrator corresponds with current psychoanalytic profiles of the "paranoid schizophrenic" personality. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", the murderer has an irrational obsession with the "evil eye" of the old man that expedites the narrator's insanity and the subsequent murder. Although mad, he tries to maintain a rational ambience for his deeds, and his anxiety towards the "evil eye" is somehow superstitious that lead to a full schizophrenic breakdown (Brett, 342)

Paranoid schizophrenics often experience sensory perceptions that are not directly attributable to environmental stimuli. About 74 per cent of schizophrenics suffer from auditory hallucinations (343). The murderer in the story says that "disease had sharpened [his] senses – not destroyed – not dulled them," and that "Above all was the sense of hearing acute." He can hear things in heaven, hell, and the earth; and sound of the beating heart of the old man which was rather an auditory hallucination. He insists that "the noise was not within my ears"; but it is simply a common symptom of schizophrenia. He admits that he has some kind of disease, but is unaware of his mental instability, a source of irony and pathos:

Why will you say that I am mad?... You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work!... And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?... If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body (95).

The mad murderer exhibits another symptom of paranoid schizophrenia i.e. shifts of mood. He begins by saying, "how calmly I can tell you the

whole story”, but as the narration progresses, he exhibits a shift in mood:

The old man’s terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!... Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me – the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man’s hour had come! (94)

Schizophrenic patients sometime exhibit wrong emotions that are unsuitable in a particular circumstance; they may laugh or weep uncontrollably. For instance when he put his head into the old man’s room, he thinks:

Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in!... To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea (93)

Afterwards, he washes the premises clean to avoid bloodstains from being found with a sense of pleasure: “A tub had caught all — ha! ha!” Finally another symptom comes out, the delusion of persecution, when the police reaches the house. He allows them to roam around and sit in the house to avoid suspicion falls on him. Soon he hears the thumping sound of the dead old man’s heart and thinks that the police too can hear it; they mock at him while he be conscious of the secret. He breaks down and reveals everything. Poe catastrophizes the madman’s hysteria through devices such as repetition, exclamations, vigorous utterances, and dashes.

Poe’s fiction is abundant with gothic themes such as death, enclosure, transgression, decay, instability, ruins, the supernatural, the grotesque, the divided self, the abject, excess and terror, using images of monsters, violated or mutant bodies, ghosts, dolls, masks, skulls, etc. (Lima, 25). A common tone in most gothic art lean on symbolism, layers of meaning and cultural explorations. Like Edgar Allan Poe, many artists well aware of the contradictions between beauty and horror, use the imagery of death and evil as a metaphor for art itself (27). Contemporary gothic creativity has inherited full artistic expression from Poe. Poe has always had an influential presence in American popular culture, from his time to the present.

In the last and the present centuries, over eighty feature-length films have been released based on Poe’s life and works; countless radio, television, and dramatic adaptations have been performed; and there have been thousands of illustrated editions of his writings published. A great many comic book adaptations of Poe have appeared, more than for any other American writer. The well-known *Classics*

*Illustrated* series alone has included Poe in over sixty editions worldwide (1944-1997); numerous other horror and general interest titles have been published (Inge, 2). Among them, Gareth Hinds’ *Poe: Stories and Poems* is a newest addition.

Gareth Hinds is an acclaimed creator of the graphic novels *Macbeth*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *King Lear*. Hinds’ adaptation translates Poe’s dark genius into the graphic novel format for Poe fans new and old. Along with Poe’s four famous short stories, three of his poems are featured in this book. Taken together, these seven concise graphic narratives both amplify and honour a timeless legacy. Hinds illustrates the vivid, macabre imagery of Poe’s stories and poems, translating his florid, descriptive prose into the medium of comics.

It is the power of an image to convey a great deal of information is what makes graphic novels popular. In a graphic narrative, each sentence is a separate panel; and each freezes the most essential moment in time. But many graphic novelists purposefully avoid every moment and leave certain gaps that the reader has to fill. Here both words and images act as signs; or in other words both signs are placed together and a new sign emerges and extra significance is conveyed to the reader (Bearden, 347). The reader is a willing collaborator; the linearity of the narration depends upon the reader. Hence one of the features of comics is the active creation of meaning by the reader. The reader constructs meaning by identifying, evaluating, and translating these gaps. Gareth Hinds too leaves the reader with the freedom to interpret the panel contents.

Hinds, in the beginning of his book, gives the reader the Poe checklist, Poe’s favourite themes he used to achieve his sense of horror. In the beginning of each story, recurring motifs are illustrated through symbols: white and black wings for angels and demons, a lock for confinement, a crow and rat for creepy animals, a skull for death, a coffin for premature burial etc. In the beginning of “The Tell-Tale Heart”, the recurring motifs are symbolised: darkness, guilty consciousness, insanity, murder, and hypersensitivity.

The graphic narrative begins by showing a desolate corridor, symbolising isolation. There are a number of doors visible; they are cells and the narrator aka the murderer is inside a cell; he is in an asylum and starts narrating his story. He narrates his fear towards the good old man; the only thing that is dreadful to him is the pale blue eye of the old man, which he sees in the light of a candle, the eye of a vulture. Hinds portrays the left eye of the old man, pale blue eye, which is “evil” for the murderer.

Hinds uses dark images to narrate how the mad murderer holds a dark lantern and opens the door of the old man's room and watches him. He is also portrayed from the left side which represents the evil intention of the murderer. He watches him for the last seven nights and when he slowly opens the shield of lantern, light emits to the left eye of the old man which is closed. On the eighth night, he did the same but while opening the lantern out of excitement, his thumb slipped upon the tin fastening and the old man awakes. He waits for an hour expecting the old man to lie down, but he is still awake. Then he decides to scare the old man and slowly opens up the lantern shutter and a single ray of light falls into the left eye of the old man which is pale blue, and "evil". The sound of the increasing heartbeat of the old man, his fear is represented by THUB... THUB... sound. He opens the lantern fully and old man is helpless because of fear and the murderer drags him to the floor, pulls the bed over him and the heartbeat slowly stops. The old man is dead. His eyes will not trouble the mad man no more. The following drawings sketch how the mad murderer dismember the old man, cleans everything and suddenly hears a knock on the door.

The police come and he allows them to check every corners of the house and finally allows them to sit in the very room where he keeps the body parts of the old man. He tries to be clam but his hysteria overcomes. He feels headache and hears scary sounds. He feels that it is coming from under the floor, a THUB, THUB sound, the heartbeat of the dead old man. He feels, police too can hear it and they are simply mocking at him. Now he sees the left eye of the three policemen turning pale blue, like the "evil eye" of the old man. He admits his deed. He says, "Tear up the planks! Here, here!" Hinds shifts the scene from inside the house of the old man and the murderer is beating the floor of the asylum and saying to tear up. Instead of the policemen there are the asylum guards who are shown treating the mad man.

Graphic novel merits attention because of the multisensory reading process; it correlates words and sequences of still images, the two basic media which interact in very complex ways on the page in order to tell a story (Rippl, 194). By bringing the graphic narrative into the realm of contemporary narratology, this hybridized form can be appreciated properly. In order to understand the author's motives and viewpoints, a reader must have visual literacy and critical literacy. Children enter into the world of literature, when they are introduced to the alphabet and learn words by associating them with respective pictures. Mythical stories are presented in graphic art, implanting the seeds of religion and morality. Graphic novel adaptations make reader identify or infer meaning or levels that may or may not be present in the original.

Gareth Hinds adds new dimensions to "The Tell-Tale Heart". He sometimes outshines the master of gothic narration by sketching new dimensions to the story that make the readers see each frame in a new light. Hinds' adaptation contributes greatly to the graphic novel genre, and emphasizes its significance in the contemporary narrative theory. Graphic novels rejuvenate the dying comic culture. Adaptations of classics attract modern readers and give them the chance to form distinctive perceptions that early readership could not make. Novelists like Hinds gives it new identity that persuades critics to take a renewed approach that will absolutely change the concept of narration and narrative in literature.

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