

WHO WATCHES OVER WHOM IN POE'S "THE TELL-TALE HEART"? AGEING AND THE FICTIONALISATION OF A NATIONAL ALLEGORY¹

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Abstract: The change of perception towards youth and age, and by extension, towards national dependence and independence, can be significantly detected in the cultural and literary discourses of nineteenth-century America. Edgar Allan Poe depicted the victimisation and stigmatisation of the elderly as a reflection of the American ambivalent perceptions towards the ageing population in mid-nineteenth-century. In Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), a young narrator acknowledges both his love and contempt for an old man whom he watches over, as he permanently feels the overwhelming perpetual vigilance the old man's Evil Eye exerts over him, which ultimately urges the narrator to murder his senior. The narrator experiences both freedom and remorse as a result of his crime, feeling both released from his obligations and tormented by his guilt. Taking Poe's tale as a case in point, this article is aimed at depicting the process of cultural stigmatisation and victimisation of the aged, as well as the unconscious social remorse in nineteenth-century America, as a reflection of the country's process of growth.

Keywords: ageing; youth; stigmatisation; victimisation; liberation; guilt; Edgar Allan Poe.

Título en español: ¿Quién vela por quién en «The Tell-Tale Heart» de Edgar Allan Poe? Envejecimiento y ficcionalización de una alegoría nacional.

Resumen: Los discursos culturales y literarios de la América decimonónica reflejan de forma significativa cambios de percepción hacia la juventud y la vejez y, por extensión, hacia los conceptos de dependencia e independencia como nación. Edgar Allan Poe describió la victimización y estigmatización de personajes mayores en varios de sus relatos, reflejando las ambivalentes concepciones culturales que existían hacia la población envejecida en la América de la primera mitad del siglo diecinueve. En el relato de Poe "El corazón delator" (1843), un joven narrador admite tanto el amor como el desdén que siente por el hombre mayor a quien cuida, al tiempo que advierte la insoportable y perpetua vigilancia que ejerce su malévolo ojo y que finalmente llevan al joven narrador a acabar con la vida del mayor. El narrador experimenta libertad y arrepentimiento tras el crimen cometido, sintiéndose liberado de sus obligaciones a la par que tormentado por su sentimiento de culpa. Tomando el relato de Poe como referencia, este artículo tiene como objetivo describir el proceso ambivalente de estigmatización y victimización cultural de la población envejecida, así como el latente remordimiento social que puede detectarse en la América del diecinueve como reflejo del proceso de crecimiento del país.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento; juventud; estigmatización; victimización; liberación; culpabilidad; Edgar Allan Poe.

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According to Thane, "in all times there have been competing optimistic and pessimistic paradigms of old age" (2000:6). In this respect, nineteenth-century attitudes held towards the aged in the United States were often contradictory. As a legacy of Puritan influence, the aged remained highly esteemed as they were supposed to have been blessed with longevity and were considered to be closer to God. Nonetheless, historical circumstances and cultural issues tended to invert the balance. Not even a century after the American War of Independence, the United States had become a nation of their own, leaving behind a period of subjection to England so that their former, and figuratively aged, mother-country was often held in contempt as a reminder of a past dependency. As part of a transforming cultural process, the ageing population began to be ostracised, and metaphorically criminalised, as the United States were gradually perceived as a young and independent nation as opposed to its former aged, even if still powerful, metropolis. Nineteenth-century narratives such as Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" portrayed this contradictory national feeling towards a young and ageing condition as a country. The portrait of a young man who turns old in just one night, and awakes years after the War of Independence to be considered mad by his former neighbours reflects the transformation that the nation was undertaking at the time.

Amid the recently established new order, the ethics of self-help and the figure of the self-made man were often equated with youth with a view to achieve prosperity and productivity, praising action and profit as national values, thus leaving behind old age and dependence. In this respect, Chase claims that "old age - not as a lived experience, but as a phenomenon provoking legislation in the social arena and noticeable publications in the literary arena - is an event of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (2009:2), as the increasing ageing population began to demand more attention. Taking into consideration this social and historical period, as well as its cultural manifestation in the literature of the time, this article aims at analysing Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) as a narrative reflecting the increasingly contradictory perceptions towards the aged population as a result of the increasing divide between the so-called Old and New World as reflected in the generational gap between age and youth in the American culture of the time.

AMBIVALENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE AGED

Attitudes towards ageing have been changing through time, and consequently, the conceptualisations of the aged as manifested in literature have also been diverse, taking into account that narratives reflect the cultural ideas of a specific nation at a given historical period. In this respect, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" addresses the contradictory attitudes towards the aged at the time by portraying the ambivalent relationship established between an old man and his young caretaker. Poe's tale unfolds a monologue uttered by a nameless narrator who persistently attempts to prove his sanity. He reveals he has developed the sense of acute hearing, implying someone who is so gifted cannot possibly be considered insane. As Sova asserts, to further convince the reader of his good sense, the narrator recounts how carefully he committed a crime, stating that such a methodical individual, who has planned so carefully his deed, could never be deemed mad (2001:235). The narrator's persistent need to prove his sanity ultimately exerts the opposite effect, that is, his anxiety seems to have altered his senses to the extent he mistakes his reveries and daydreams

for what he assumes to be a great capacity for acute hearing, that is, a display of his own superiority as an individual. Conversely, he actually confesses he is ill, as he states "the disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them" (290). In this respect, his acknowledged overacuteness of the senses, his need to ascertain his sanity, his alleged disease, as well as his fixation to murder the old man without any apparent object underline the narrator's altered state from the very beginning, thus betraying his unreliability as a narrator and a story-teller.

The narrator's ambivalent condition persists all through his monologue, and becomes especially relevant when he first discusses his relationship with his senior. As a way to introduce his tale of confession, the anxious narrator in Poe's tale acknowledges his contradictory views with regard to his ageing master in the following terms: "I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult" (290). The narrator significantly admits he feels affection for his aged master, as he seems to be the only person engaged in taking care of him. Nonetheless, a disparity of power between both individuals is subtly implied when the narrator asserts "for his gold I had no desire" (290), which involves the old man is fairly wealthy and the young man may feel economically dependent on him. Even if the young caretaker acknowledges his love for the old man, he also confesses he loves him without passion, thus implying his affection may be taken for granted given the mutually dependent relationship established between patient and carer. In this respect, as Hackett (1978) points out, respect for old age at that time was not entirely voluntary but forced.

This foretelling beginning seems particularly significant and illustrative of the political and historical situation of the nation on a greater scale. The United States became independent from Great Britain in 1776, and at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, the American nation seemed to be in search of an identity of its own. This process of separation pervaded the relations established between both countries at the time. The space dividing the former metropolis, England, and its previous colony, the United States, also involved a time divide, so that space distance inevitably involved holding different perspectives in relation to time, the actual and the potential, the past and the present, and ultimately, and age and youth. As Mulvey points out, the American traveller usually felt simultaneous admiration and contempt for England and the English in the nineteenth-century (1990:3-4), precisely because of the dilemma of looking backwards and forwards at the same time; a process which took place geographically and psychologically as well. As a nation of its own, the United States awaited definition but its tradition was inevitably linked to its historical past under British rule. Consequently, the American appropriation of an English past could become a source of considerable anxiety so as to come to terms with the present situation, thus ultimately giving way to the need to construct American identities in sharp contrast with the English tradition.

This political and identitary contest between both nations often became identified with the generational gap traditionally established between youth and age which was often implied in the use of the terminology Old and New World. The arising and young nation seemed to be in the need of rejecting the past, the older generation, so as to become independent and establish an identity of its own. As Covey argues, values such as independence, self-determination, freedom of thought, and economic self-sufficiency were strongly emphasised in the United States (1991:168). The struggle between the past and the future, age and youth,

older and younger generations, thus becomes a national allegory that underlines the process that the American nation was undergoing at the time, looking backwards to its immediate past of subjugation and looking forward to a promising and yet unknown future of its own. This was the traditionally established contrast between the experience of Europe and the innocence of America that writers like Henry James and Edith Wharton would profusely explore. After all, as Spender (1974) claims, the Declaration of Independence was not only a decisive revolutionary act in the world's history, but it was also a literary event.

As a result of this political and historical situation, the philosophical and literary discourses of the time reflected the national dilemma between the past and the future as symbolised through the metaphor of age and youth. This contest involved consequences at a sociological level, which gave way to an increasing contempt for age and a resulting admiration for youth. Thus, the divide between old and new, as well as age and youth, acquired implications at a political, identity and sociological level. In this respect, even under a Puritan mindset, moralists began to compile catalogues of vices and errors which were thought to be idiosyncratic of the old. As a case in point, Cotton Mather wrote that "old age is often too covetous, too sparing, too hoarding and ready to lay up [...] Old folks often seem to grasp the hardest for the world, when they are just going out of it: an evil release" (1726:29). In turn, Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau, in his seminal volume *Walden*, went as far as to assert that

Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give to the young, their experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as they must believe; and it may be that they have some faith left which belies that experience, and they are only less young that they were (HACKETT 1978: 115).

And yet, conversely, the American nation was inextricably linked to England in recent history. Consequently, even if having been established as a nation of its own, the United States often glanced across the Atlantic to find part of its national roots. England would always remain as a mother country. Even though America was often considered as a young nation as opposed to the old metropolis, the past inevitably lay dormant. This national dilemma was again perceived towards the contradictory perceptions of youth and age, which are significantly present in Poe's tale. Despite the atrocious deeds the narrator is about to unveil, he begins his confession asserting he loved the old man, even though his ambivalent feelings towards his senior are revealed when he depicts the unfathomable and excruciating influence the old man's eye exerts upon the young carer.

THE OBSESSIVE VIGILANCE OF THE AGED

In Poe's tale the pervasive cultural ambivalence towards the aged at the time is perceived through the narrator's contradictory feelings towards the old man. Even though he admits he loves the old man, as time goes by, the young caretaker begins to nourish an unbearable

hatred towards the elder he looks after. His coexistence with the old man becomes unbearable, as the carer looks after the old man and watches him over day and night. Through the first lines of his confessional monologue, the narrator seems to imply his existence is subjected to his master's whims as well as his perpetual duty to watch over him constantly. Secluded in a house, the exhausting responsibility of watching over the old man erodes his sanity to the extent he develops an acute sense of hearing, which arises as a result of his obsessive and continuous watchfulness. At a national level, this constant surveillance seems to bear resemblance with the still powerful English presence that the young American nation must have perceived as a country struggling to start an existence of its own. As a result of this perpetual presence, and in clear analogy with many of Poe's narrators such as Egaeus in "Berenice", the narrator in Poe's tale indulges in an obsessive monomania. If Egaeus presents a fixation with Berenice's teeth, the nameless narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is absolutely mesmerised by the old man's eye. As the young caretaker asserts, "the old man 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". (290)

The young narrator's depiction of the old man's eye equates the elder with a predator, as he preys upon his persona and deprives him of a life of his own. In this respect, the young caretaker is subtly compelled to sacrifice his own existence for the sake of the old man's life and health, and thus his narrative can be interpreted as a tale of revenge. Actually, in his classification of Poe's tales, Van Doren (1986) categorised "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a story of revenge and murder, together with tales such as "The Black Cat", "The Cask of Amontillado", or "Hop-Frog". All these four tales address situations that ultimately end up in murder, even if the crucial motive differs in each of them. If Montresor and Hop-Frog indulge in murder out of revenge, the unnamed narrators in both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" seem to act under no ascertainable grounds. In Van Doren's view, "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Black Cat", and "The Imp of the Perverse" have much in common as all three tales deal with a murderer who seems to have committed a perfect crime, and apparently is about to escape the consequences. Nonetheless, despite this apparent self-confidence, in all cases the killer surrenders and confesses his guilt. In this respect, Van Doren considers them to be tales of conscience (288), as their narrators ultimately feel the need to confess their deeds.

The narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" gives no reason for committing a murder, and yet his ambivalent motive, his both love and hate towards the old man seem intricate enough to deserve some further explanation. The narrator's unreliability is again exposed when, after acknowledging he had no object to murder the old man, he subsequently admits he decided to kill the old man to release himself from his eye. The young man's reason to commit the crime does not respond to economic profit or sudden choleric outburst, but it rather arises as a result of a more complex and intricate motivation. As the narrator asserts, "it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye" (291). For the young caretaker, the old man's eye represents his master's power of observance and watchfulness over him. Moreover, his master's eye can also be interpreted as his own persona, his own 'I', to the extent the narrator's obsession with his master's gaze unifies his contempt towards what the old man represents, that is, his whole being as well as his authority over him. The nar-

rator obsessively reiterates his hatred is not for the old man himself, but for his Evil Eye, that is, what he really represents. As a representative of authority and surveillance, this ambivalent relationship is again reminiscent of the situation the American nation had been undergoing for years, which ultimately resulted in proclaiming its political independence from Great Britain.

As is the case with the narrator, the old man remains unnamed through the tale, and is only identified by means of his age, through the epithet "the old man." The aged individual's condition, following Small (2007), seems to reflect the temporal boundedness of human lives as well as the limited nature of the empirical world. In this respect, as Small contends, a link is established between the boundary between life and death as brought to mind by the decline of the very old, and the philosophical boundary between the physical and the metaphysical (180). Consequently, ageing becomes a vital issue in Poe's tale as a reminder of the inescapable end of human life and the excruciating limits attached to the empirical reality. Drawing further on this national allegory, subjection to the old nation inevitably seemed to involve the metaphorical death of the emerging American nation.

At that time, prejudices towards the aged were rooted in the fact the elderly were inevitably linked to death, and consequently, as Gerald Kennedy asserts, in Poe's tale, "the crime is ultimately rooted in death anxiety" (1987:133). In this sense, Carlson claims that the narrator denies his own 'mortal terror' by stimulating control over time and space and by impersonating 'Death' itself to be rid of a threat that is simultaneously without and within (1996:249). Similarly, according to Covey (1991), old age has come to be the standard symbol even in our day for time, the miser, and the witch (164). Thus, the aged man's real 'I' in Poe's tale is that he is old, and consequently, he represents the prejudices and assumptions attached to the aged at the time, mainly involving authority and parental control, both at a national and individual level. In this respect, some critics like Kennedy (2001), drawing on biographical readings of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", have identified the young narrator's ambivalent feelings towards the old man as Poe's own sense of love-and-hate with regard to his tempestuous relation with his foster father John Allan.

AN INSIGHT INTO A NATIONAL AND CULTURAL ALLEGORY OF THE AGED

As an attempt to interpret Poe's tale as a national allegory, it seems plausible to identify similarities between the narrator's ambivalent attitudes towards ageing and dependence, and the American nation's approach to both its past subjection and its ultimate release. Taking ageing as a cultural discourse, it is possible to relate nineteenth-century changing attitudes towards ageing in America to its evolving discourse of growth and maturation as a country to achieve its independence as a nation. Thus, the narrator's crime in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" underlines issues which particularly address the evolving attitudes towards ageing and its ultimate contempt which would disseminate the global discourse of America as a young nation. In this respect, the narrator's determination to murder the old man underlines a wider cultural discourse which began to take shape in the early nineteenth-century America.

This discourse is supported by the field of research known as transatlantic literary studies, which consists in "focusing upon British and American cultures [...] to show how

the emergence of autonomous and separate political identities during this era can be seen as intertwined with a play of opposites, a series of reciprocal attractions and repulsions between opposing national situations" (GILES 2001:1). In this sense, as Giles argues, the crossover between British and American writings has given way to double-edged discourses which subvert traditional hierarchies and power relations, thus underlining the stereotypical boundaries existing between both national cultures (GILES 2002:5). Instead of focusing on American and English literatures in isolation, transatlantic comparative analyses between cultural renderings of both realities are encouraged so as to destabilise binary oppositions based on national grounds and introduce a different and double-sided perspective in Anglo-American literary studies.

According to Weisbuch, the struggle between both cultures can be perceived in their two distinct senses of cultural time, British lateness and American earliness, which resulted in a sort of metaphorical Anglo-American dispute (2007:97). Towards the first half of the nineteenth-century, the United States presented a comparatively new configuration, and few decades after its independence from Britain, American culture still awaited definition. Since the newly established American nation, staring at the comparative model that Britain offered, could not possibly compete with the cultural maturity that characterised the former metropolis, cultural earliness became a definable attribute of the United States as opposed to the cultural lateness of the significantly named Old World.

In 1843, which is precisely the year when Poe published "The Tell-Tale Heart", William Cullen Bryant referred to this cultural Anglo-American struggle, which arose after the political fight had ended, using a telling metaphor, the pulse between age and youth, thus claiming that the mind of England, *old* and knit by years and wisdom seemed to be in struggle with an America roused to new duties in its *youth* (SPENCER 1957:86). Bryant's thesis also appeared to underline Oscar Wilde's well-known phrase stating that the youth of America is precisely its oldest tradition. Likewise, Weisbuch makes use of this political and national metaphor to provide a new interpretation of some Victorian novels through the discourse of cultural lateness that some nineteenth-century English texts often present. As a case in point, Weisbuch refers to Catherine Earnshaw's death in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, arguing that Catherine dies because she fails to resolve the conflict in her character between cultural lateness, and the earliness of nature that arises and prevails later on in the novel.

Cultural earliness, youth, allowed the American nation to interpret barrenness as a clearing of the ground for potential development. Conversely, cultural earliness may also imply cultural emptiness, in clear resemblance with youthfulness, which may be interpreted either as a stage full of potential or as a necessary period of immaturity until the ultimate advent of adulthood. Cultural earliness, that is, youth, necessarily succeeded lateness, age, in the case of the nineteenth-century American nation. Drawing further on this metaphor, by means of becoming gradually detached from Britain through a process of restorative undoing and political detachment, the United States could defend against the achievements of the British cultural tradition so as to emerge as a nation of its own right, characterised by youth and potential, instead of age and accomplishments.

Likewise, in Poe's tale, the young narrator, as representative of a younger generation, struggles against an older generation, which also implies a personification of any relics of

a past of acute subjection. The contest is thus held between age and youth, dependence and independence, old regime and a new situation as a newly-founded nation. For the young narrator to survive and live an existence of his own, he feels compelled to get rid of the old man. Even though this may mean a more insecure existence, the narrator needs to release himself from the old man's overwhelming control. As the narrator asserts, once he had made up his mind to murder his senior, this idea haunted him day and night so that his fixation with the old man's watchful eye is then followed by his obsession to murder him.

THE FIGURE OF THE DOUBLE: YOUTH AND AGE

The young narrator has acquired an outstanding capacity for watching over his old master to the extent he enters the old man's room every night and day. At night, he silently approaches the man to find him sleeping, and in the daytime, he also goes into his master's room to inquire how he has passed the night. This careful process of vigilance is thus gradually reversed as the narrator constantly watches over the old man to ascertain the best occasion to accomplish his deed, his intention "to take the life of the old man" (290). The narrator significantly confesses he performed the same methodical procedure for seven long nights, which implies he watched over the old man perpetually as, according to Biblical hermeneutics, the number seven denotes completeness (TERRY 1890:290). The young narrator emphasises his procedure was serene and methodical, thus intending to prove his deed was not the result of mere insanity. Nonetheless, his repetitive discourse and his recurring procedure betray his monomania towards the old man:

It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! – would a madman have been so wise as this? 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. (291)

Significantly, given the narrator's unusual nervousness, the exhaustive and methodical task of watching over the old man ultimately gives way to wicked machinations and preparations to murder him. The nameless narrator thus betrays his burdensome existence as the caretaker of an old man. From the very beginning, the narrator admits he has a nervous temper, which has probably been caused by his obsessive watchfulness over his master to the extent his perpetual vigilance has resulted in some sort of dependence on the old man. Likewise, every single night the narrator points his lantern to the old man so that a ray falls upon the old man's eye, thus implying mutual watchfulness. Through his hatred towards the old man's eye, the narrator gradually unfolds his master's continuous vigilance over him. Nonetheless, the narrator is also dependent on his master as he perpetually watches over all the old man's moves.

This tiresome and ever-lasting process of alertness and mutual dependence makes it difficult to ascertain who watches over whom in the tale. Actually, the old man also watches over his own caretaker as he acquires the habit of permanently staring at the narrator through his evil eye. His constant vigilance may arise either as a result of his need to ensure the

young man takes appropriate care of himself, or rather as an attempt to discover the narrator's wicked intentions. Thus, if the narrator's discourse can often be termed as unreliable, the old man is also presented as an ambivalent character, as the young narrator's feelings towards him are often contradictory. Despite the onerous power his evil eye exerts over the narrator, the old man also seems totally dependent on the narrator's mercy, given his weak condition and well-aware his ending is close at hand. Conversely, the old man's evil eye, as a reification of his need for power and control, exerts its dominance over the narrator so that its ever-lasting presence exerts an unbearable influence over the narrator's anxious condition. All in all, both the old man and the narrator indulge in a continuous struggle for power over the other, unaware that they are both dependent on each other, as the narrator's moves are determined by the old man's behaviour, and ultimately, the old man's vigilance is permanently exerted over the young narrator's actions.

At a national level, the historical situation between both countries seemed to imply a symbiosis despite the recent political separation of both nations. The mutual vigilance between both countries implied a dependant situation, especially from an American perspective. American culture needed to be constructed and this process inevitably implied looking back to its cultural roots through transnationalism. According to Giles (2002), in the context of transatlantic studies, this seems to illustrate the principle of telesthesia, which means perception at a distance. Consequently, despite an apparently obvious disruption, the American nation was still rooted in the English tradition it had imbibed, and thus needed to look backwards in order to move forward.

In Poe's tale, this mutual process of vigilance, which involves both characters' lack of freedom, ultimately leads the narrator to commit murder in an attempt to release himself of his oppressive existence, since the narrator's obsession with his master's watchfulness is what eventually urges him to murder. Despite his constant intrusion into the old man's chamber at night, the narrator believes his old master remains ignorant of his evil intentions as he asserts "he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept" (291). The young man's conceit and pride, and his evident prejudices towards the old man, often urge the reader not to trust his words completely, as he later admits he knew "he [the old man] had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise" (292). On previous nights, when the narrator entered the old man's room, he found his eyes were closed, thus assuming he was fast asleep. Nonetheless, the narrator waits for the moment the old man is awake as he only intends to get rid of his eye, that is, his permanent vigilance over him.

As he claims, some moments before committing the murder, the old man's evil eye has become his obsession to the extent the narrator no longer considers the old man a person: "I saw it with perfect distinctness – all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person" (293). Once the narrator realises his master is awake, he indulges in the fear and terror the old man must be feeling, as he is aware that death is approaching him. It is at this stage the narrator gets to know the inversion of power, as his master's life is literally in his hands:

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. *All in vain*; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. (292-293)

As the old man becomes more vulnerable, the narrator begins to feel the extent of his own power. The exchange of roles from caretaker to murderer, and from master to victim, underpins the reversal of responsibilities old age brings about, as the old man, who held the authority, becomes weaker and the young man, who remained dependent, begins to hold limitless power. In this sense, as Magistrale (2001) points out in his Marxist interpretation of Poe's tale, the narrator's monologue reveals the story of a patriarchal domination and oppression that must be violently confronted (101). The narrator has assumingly been watched over by the old man all through his childhood and youth up to the present, when the generational roles have eventually been reversed, and now the child has grown up, and the adult has grown old.

Drawing on a national allegory, the child, America, has grown up so as to become independent from its mother country, thus subverting the former relationship established between both nations. Such exchange of roles, from being watched to becoming the watcher, ultimately proves fatal to both the narrator and the old man. The narrator's attempt to gain insight into the old man's mind at this stage suggests the former mutual watchfulness established between both characters may ultimately result in an analogical parallelism. In this sense, the young narrator becomes the double of the old man, as he has been precisely repeating and imitating the old man's watchful procedure.

According to Cole (1993), the Romantics reinforced the Victorian dualism of old age, implying their ideal of self-control and perfect health required a negative mirror image: the sinful old man suffering in a corrupt body (138). The young narrator thus feels an ambivalent feeling towards the old man, not entirely unlike the narrator's feelings towards his double in Poe's "William Wilson". The young narrator even feels sympathy for the old man before fulfilling his terrible deed, and yet, he cannot help chuckling at the same time. In this respect, he acknowledges "I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart" (292). The old man is deprived of the strength and power he used to have, whereas the narrator is endowed with the newly-acquired authority that has gradually been eroding his existence, and especially, his sanity.

Likewise, despite the fact the young narrator feels terrible hatred at his senior's eye, he has been watching over the old man permanently, thus replicating his old master's movements. In this respect, the old man's existence has become entangled with his own, and consequently, as is shown later in the tale, the old man's absence cannot entirely be welcome as it will not entail the relief the young narrator had anticipated. At a national level, political independence did not involve a straightforward end of relations between both countries, since the American nation necessarily glanced backward to England, even if just to construct its own detached self-identity.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOME, EXCRUCIATING GUILT

In spite of the apparent end of this anguishing process of mutual surveillance, the narrator seems to exchange rage with guilt. Once the old man's eye can no longer torment him, the young narrator develops a strategy to cope with this terrible absence. His existence has depended on the old man's movements as he spent his life watching over his old master. Since his terrible eye - his authority to control his young pupil has vanished - only his heart remains. Consequently, as shown in the tale, the narrator's assumed liberation does not bring its purported effect but rather worsens its cause as the ultimate absence of his master proves as insufferable as his former vigilance, establishing the narrator's anxiety ultimately gives way to excruciating guilt. If the narrator's monomania was previously focused on the old man's eye, now the last beatings of the old man's heart have become his obsession: "I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant" (293). The narrator admits he loved the old man, and it was his evil eye which became the object of his contempt. Once his eye is no longer a reason for concern, the only thing that remains is the narrator's former affection for the late old man, which ultimately gives way to agonizing guilt and the need to confess his wicked deed.

Nonetheless, the narrator's true nature still remains ambivalent after the old man's death, as his tale can be read either as a confessional monologue as a result of guilt or as a conceited display of his heroic, even if wicked, deed. The narrator ironically describes the way he dismembered the old man's body, and concealed his corpse under three planks from the chamber floor, "so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye - not even *his* - could have detected anything wrong" (294). However, the narrator often becomes an easy prey to his nervous condition, as his apprehension and altered senses lead him to hear the strong beatings of the old man's heart even after he has been killed and buried.

From a national perspective, as Spender argues, at that time, the American nation was more concerned about its relations with the European culture than the English were with the American (1974:x). For most Americans, despite the recent independence, England still represented civilisation and the origins of its national roots. Conversely, for others, the process of severing national ties with the English was absolutely necessary to grant the American nation the spontaneity and youth needed to grow as a country of its own. This cultural and political dilemma seems to underline Poe's tale, as the narrator, having chosen to take the life of the old man, still feels his presence, no longer through the evil eye, but through the beatings of the old man's heart. Thus, the relationship established between both individuals is no longer characterised by vigilance, but rather by an unexpected sort of emotional and nostalgic tie that still links the young carer to the old man. The narrator has spent so much time taking care of the old man that his existence has become inextricably linked to that of his elderly patient, consequently the narrator considers his life meaningless without the old man's presence.

The narrator's permanent pressure to watch over his master has distorted his senses, rendering him unable to assert whether any fact is real or invented, thus hearing the beatings of the late old man. Feeling guilty for his master's death, he confesses the murder when the officers approach the three planks under which the remains of the old man's body have been

buried. Once the narrator has nobody to look after and watch over, and likewise, nobody invigilates upon him, he needs to recreate his former sense of pressure and guilt, which is actually reified by the beatings of the old man's heart. After a whole lifetime watching over the old man neurotically, the narrator is still permanently haunted by guilt, as he was formerly haunted by the old man's evil eye. In this sense, as Selley contends, "Poe's 'post-humous' voices show that life on earth is death, and that death – although it must break down through decay all matter and spirit – allows the man of imagination to be born again" (1990:100). In this perpetual cycle, death implies some sort of rebirth, just as the old man's life reminded the narrator of death. Likewise, despite the narrator's constant justification of his sanity, the narrator's mental state renders him unable to distinguish between fact and reverie after such an overextended period of constant watchfulness:

My head ached and I fancied a ringing in my ears [...] it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness – until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears. (295)

The narrator's obsession is ultimately caused by his extenuating guilt to the extent that, as Carlson argues, "the internalised powers of Inquisitorial inspection and torment overtake him and lead him to a self-destructive confession, directing the violence back to the source of those fears from which it had been originally deflected" (249). After defeating the old man's authority and power, his eye, the narrator cannot help suffering guilt. Actually, the nameless narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" feels the agony of his guilt, through the ever-lasting beatings of the old man's heart, to the extent he confesses his deed to the officers admitting "anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!" (296) In this respect, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", together with tales such as "The Imp of the Perverse" or "The Cask of Amontillado", has often been interpreted as tales of confession in which apparently self-confident and conceited narrators gradually unfold their anxious condition through their nervous discourse and their obsessive necessity to unveil their wicked deeds.

CONCLUSION

Poe's tale can be considered a national allegory, bringing to the floor the political and identity anxieties of a nation coming to terms with its own future, and leaving behind its past subjection to England. Likewise, it is also a tale of murder and guilt whereby the cultural and ambivalent perceptions towards the aged in nineteenth-century America are addressed and discussed. The ever-lasting relationship established between the old man and the narrator, the choking responsibility of the narrator to take care of the old man counteracted by the master's powerful vigilance over his young narrator, their mutual dependence and vigilance, the duality characterising both characters, as well as the old man's ultimate end together with the narrator's ambiguous reasons for his crime underline crucial issues with regard to national identity and ageing in nineteenth-century America.

As an allegory of a young nation, leaving behind a past of subjection and dependence, and as a personal story of an individual struggling to achieve both economic and personal independence, Poe's tale addresses issues of ageing and powerlessness, authority and watchfulness, as well as crime and guilt which contribute to categorising the double-edged discourse of national ageing in mid-nineteenth-century America. In this respect, using Hackett's own terms, Poe's tale is representative of the ambivalent attitudes in the American nation towards national ageing, which underlined the transformation from a former cult of age to a prospective worship of youth which can still be perceived to exist today.

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