



# From Mirror to Shatter: A Lacanian Reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart”

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## Abstract

This paper uses Lacan’s mirror stage theory to deeply analyze Allen Poe’s short story “The Tell-Tale Heart”. It reveals the distortion and conflict of the protagonist’s psychological mechanism by analyzing how he constructs his self-identity illusion. At the same time, the paper also explores the key role of other gaze in the formation of self-identity.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics, Literature

## Keywords

Lacan, The Tell-Tale Heart, Mirror Image Theory

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Edgar Allan Poe

In the history of American literature, Edgar Allan Poe stands as a towering figure whose works delve into the darkest corners of the human psyche. Known for his exploration of themes such as madness, alienation, and the fragility of the human mind, Poe’s writings are often seen as precursors to modern psychological fiction. His troubled childhood—marked by the abandonment of his father, the early death of his mother, and a strained relationship with his foster father—profoundly influenced his literary themes. These personal tragedies are reflected in his works, which frequently depict characters grappling with psychological turmoil and existential dread. Poe’s life continued to be marked by personal and professional struggles, particularly after the death of his wife Virginia in 1847, which led to a significant decline in his mental and physical health. His own death in 1849 remains shrouded in mystery, with various theories suggesting causes ranging from

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alcoholism to other medical conditions. This enigmatic end to his life further underscores the complexity of his legacy, as scholars continue to debate the interplay between his personal experiences and the profound psychological depth of his literary works.

### **1.2. The Tell-Tale Heart**

The Tell-Tale Heart tells the story of a young man with extremely sensitive mental state who killed an elderly man. It was all because he felt that the old man's vulture-like gaze was too much for him to bear. For a week he watched the sleeping old man. It was not until the eighth night that he burst into the old man's room and killed him. The young man cut up the old man's body and hide it under the floorboards of his room. A neighbor later reported hearing screams in the middle of the night that brought in the police. At first, the young man handled the police interrogation with ease and complacency. He was even arrogant enough to sit on top of the floor where the old man's body was hidden and chat with the police. Slowly, however, he heard the old man's heart beating, and the sound got louder and louder, driving him crazy. He thought the police heard it too, but mocked him by pretending to hear nothing. Finally he moved the floorboards apart and confessed his guilt.

## **2. A Brief Overview of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory**

The mirror stage is a highly influential concept developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan during his academic career. This theory not only enriches the theoretical system of psychoanalysis, but also provides new perspectives and analytical tools for literature, cultural studies, psychology and other fields.

In Lacanian theory, the mirror stage refers to the moment when an infant first recognizes its own reflection in a mirror, leading to the formation of a coherent self-image. This stage is crucial for the development of the ego, although the sense of mastery it provides is ultimately illusory. Imaginary identification occurs when the subject identifies with an external image, often leading to a distorted sense of self. The symbolic order, on the other hand, represents the realm of language and social norms, which structures the subject's relationship with the external world. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the protagonist's fixation on the old man's eye can be seen as a form of imaginary identification, where the eye serves as a mirror reflecting his own psychological distortions.

### **2.1. Mirror Stage**

In the pre-mirror stage (the first six months after birth), the baby is mainly in a passive state of receiving external stimuli, unable to actively perceive and understand the world. Their perceptions are fragmented and unable to integrate these fragments into a unified overall concept. As a result, infants at this time lack an awareness of the oneness and wholeness of themselves and the outside world.

As babies grow (from about six months to eighteen months), they enter what

Lacan calls the “mirror period.” At this stage, infants begin to actively perceive the world, especially when they see themselves in the mirror, and will show a love of self-image, interacting with the mirror image through responses such as smiling. This interaction is not only a simple smile, but also a kind of identification and a happy catch of the infant’s own image, which marks their beginning to shift from passive reception to active perception. Lacan argues that this mirror identification is the basis for the infant’s ability to acquire control over imagination [1]. Although this control is illusory, it allows the infant to experience a kind of comfortable control over the wholeness of the body in the imagination. Such expectations and fantasies have a profound effect on the growth of infants, laying the foundation for their subsequent actual control activities.

In the pre-mirror stage, the baby is in a state of ignorance, unable to clearly distinguish between the self and the surrounding environment. Entering the “mirror stage”, the infant becomes aware of the differences between himself and the outside world and tries to eliminate these differences by identifying with the image in the mirror. This process marks a major leap in infants’ cognitive development and is the starting point at which they begin to form a sense of self and subjectivity. In the pre-mirror period, the subject (the infant) has only “partial objects” in his eyes, lacks the concept of unity and wholeness, and his experience of his own body and the world around him is fragmented, disjointed, and disconnected. However, this does not mean that the subject (the infant) begins with an idea of difference because the subject (the infant) has not yet established itself and cannot distinguish itself from the outside world. Lacan says, “The imaging of man is a special kind of imaging [1].”

Entering the “mirror stage”, the subject (infant) acquires unprecedented imaginative control through the imaginary identification with the mirror image. While this imagined control is fundamentally different from the actual control that the subject (the baby) later gains as the body matures, the implications are profound. It conveys the baby’s anticipation of being cared for, despite being physically uncoordinated and incapable of moving freely. But at the level of imagination, through the identification with the mirror image, infants expect a kind of free control of the whole body [2]. This expectation will leave a deep mark on all physical control activities to be carried out in the future. However, the imaginary control of the mirror image is actually a kind of illusory control, and can not replace the actual control activities in real life. Therefore, it can only attract the baby’s interest for a certain period of time.

In the field of psychology, mirror stage theory has been used to explain self-identity problems in children’s psychological development [3]. At around eighteen months, the baby’s interest shifts from being obsessed with the mirror image to trying to control tools and interact with other people’s behavior, marking the end of the “mirror period.” The disappearance of the subject’s (infant’s) obsession with mirror behavior is a necessary stage in the growth process, which is not a bad thing. It is only when the subject (the infant) is detached from the narcissistic

imaginary identity that the intervention of symbolic order or language becomes possible. The oneness that the infant acquires through the mirror experience makes the individual one with the world. The mirror image is the beginning of the self and the beginning of all imaginary identification. After the acquisition of the mirror experience, the relationship between the subject (the infant) and the outside world is embodied as an imaginary relationship between the self and others or the small other. Any imaginary relationship is based on narcissistic mirror identification, which is the groundbreaking of the “mirror period.” In general, the “mirror period” is when the human subject (infant) attempts to overcome the opposition to the outside world after birth through the imaginary identification with the mirror, and it is an expectation of the subject (infant) to their own maturity. Although the unity obtained through mirror image is the illusory unity of imagination, it creates the birth of the alienated subject of self.

The imaginary function of the self-initiated by the experience of the mirror period does not end with the end of the mirror period. On the contrary, it will run through life as an indispensable ability of the human subject [4]. Moreover, the mirror stage does not only appear in infancy but has always existed in human life.

It is worth noting that the so-called mirror is not only the real mirror, the eyes and evaluation of others around also have the role of a mirror. In the process of growth, the subject’s self-identification needs to be reflected by various mirrors, including interaction with others, in order to obtain beneficial feedback to correct themselves and establish themselves.

## 2.2. Self

The mirror stage is not only a critical period in the formation of self-identity, but also the starting point for individuals to distinguish themselves from others [5]. Lacan offers a vivid metaphor: “The self is an object made like an onion; peel it away and you will find the continuous identity that constitutes it [6].” This metaphor highlights that the mirror image is like the heart of the onion, the lowest level of identification; The outer onion flap symbolizes the continuous shaping and adjustment of the self-image. It is worth noting that although the mirror image can be seen as the prototype of the self, the subject (the infant) does not initially know that the mirror is only a virtual image. For subject, the mirror image is the external other or “lesser it.” Lacan emphasizes the dynamic role of Libido in internalizing this external image into the self. The flow of Libido is extremely complex, not one-way, but like a “teeter-totter” reciprocating. Lacan therefore calls this cycle the “teeter-totter effect.” Under the effect of “teeter-totter effect”, there is a profound role transformation between the subject and the mirror.

The formation of the self is not done at once, but through the accumulation of many narcissistic identities. In this process, the individual integrates the qualities that attract him from others into himself, and the original external other gradually penetrates and shapes himself. Once the self is formed, it often forgets the influence of others in this process, and it is difficult to detect the role transformation

under the “teeter-totter” effect of Libido.

### 2.3. Other

In Lacan’s mirror theory, the meaning of the other can be divided into the following three aspects:

**Signifier:** The other as the first signifier, especially the mother as the first signifier, opens the prelude to the symbolic order. Subsequently, the father signifier takes over from the mother as the new other signifier in the name of the Father.

**The place of speech:** The other is the core place of speech activity, providing a platform for communication between different subjects. At the same time, the other also exists as a signifier and plays the role of the subject of others.

**The place of the unconscious:** Speech activities are essentially carried out at the level of the unconscious, so the other is also the bearer of the unconscious. True verbal communication is actually dialogue on an unconscious level.

The self is born by means of the other and exists by means of the other [1]. The baby smiles at the mirror image and identifies with it. The result of identification is to see the mirror other as the self. The self first appears in the form of the other. Lacan puts it this way: “In fact, the illusory subject is reflected by the imaginary eye, which is what we call the other. The other is there, and in the eyes of the other we see for the first time our own self, which exists outside of us in human form ([1], p. 198).”

## 3. A Lacanian Interpretation of the “The Tell-Tale Heart”

### 3.1. The Emergence of the Mirror

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Edgar Allan Poe delves into the depths of the human psyche, presenting a young man who is troubled by the vulture-like eye of an old man, leading him to commit murder. The article is written in the first person. The narrator “I” is actually an unreliable narrator. This story provides a rich basis for exploring the emergence of the self and the construction of self-identity through Lacan’s mirror stage theory. The narrator’s attention focus on the old man’s eye can be seen as a symbolic representation of the “mirror stage.” In this stage, the self is constructed through an illusory identification with an idealized image.

“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 [7].” This description of the eyes evokes an uncanny sensation and elicits a response from the narrator. This response is similar to what infants experience during the pre-mirroring stage, when the subject has not yet developed a coherent sense of self. In the novel the eye becomes a focal point, a mirror. What the narrator sees in it is not the old man, but a distorted version of himself, a version filled with fear and a need for control.

The mirror stage, as proposed by Lacan, describes the moment when the baby first recognizes its own image in the mirror, which leads to an illusory sense of

mastery over the body. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator's gaze into the eyes represents a similar moment of self-knowledge. The narrator's elaborate planning of the crime is described as "how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation". This narcissism reflects a false sense of control, similar to how satisfied infants were with their reflection in the mirror in the experiment. However, the narrator's sanity is questionable, as he commits an irrational act of murder despite insisting that he is rational. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the narrator's struggle to maintain the illusion of self-control and coherence. This performance is also much like the infant's initial identification with the mirror image. The act of murder, intended to free the narrator from his eyes, however, leads to deeper paranoia and madness.

In the original text, it is described as follows: "For a week I watched the sleeping old man ... It was not until the eighth night that he burst into the old man's room and killed him." The protagonist's surveillance behavior this week is not only a response to the old man's gaze, but also a process in which his inner "mirror image" gradually takes shape. In this process, he kept talking with the old man's gaze in his imagination, trying to find a way to eliminate the fear caused by this gaze. With the continuous monitoring behavior, the protagonist gradually constructs an illusion of self-identity in his imagination. He believes that he can completely get rid of fear by controlling the life and death of the old man. The construction of this illusion is not only an exaggeration of self-strength, but also a helpless escape from reality. In the protagonist's imagination, he becomes a hero who can control everything, and the old man's gaze becomes an enemy he must conquer.

This paragraph of description in the original text is particularly crucial: "I had been too wary for that. A tube had caught all-ha! ha! When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. Here, the protagonist's calmness and self-confidence have reached its peak. He believes that he has perfectly hidden the crime and can even laugh at those who may reveal his secret. However, what is hidden behind this self-confidence is his blind exaggeration of self-strength and his escape from reality.

In Lacan's theory, the relationship between the baby and its image is still an imaginary relationship [8]. The same is true of the self-identity illusion constructed by the protagonist in imagination. The man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" tried to prove his strength and courage by controlling the life and death of the old man, but in fact this control was just an illusion in his heart.

### 3.2. The Distortion of the Mirror

The core of the protagonist's psychological confusion lies in sensitivity and paranoia. The protagonist believes that the old man's "bald eagle like" eyes are a persistent threat. This high sensitivity is reflected in his inability to ignore the slightest sound. Even in the quiet of the night. Any subtle sound was amplified in his mind, transforming into the pounding of the old man's heart. As Edgar Allan Poe wrote, "The hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and

louder and louder every instant.” This escalating anxiety is a microcosm of the protagonist’s increasingly distorted reality. The narrator claims, “I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell.” This heightened sensitivity is not just a physical condition but a psychological one, rooted in a deep-seated fear of losing control. So the narrator interprets every sound as the old man’s heartbeat.

The protagonist’s mind also has a psychological mechanism of projection. He projected his fear and anxiety onto the old man, interpreting his gaze as sinister. This projection intensified his paranoia, prompting him to decide to eliminate the perceived danger by killing the elderly. The protagonist’s imagination plays a crucial role in maintaining and amplifying his psychological distortions. His imagined control over the situation, as evidenced by his attempt to make the light of the lamp steadily shine on the old man’s eyes, was a gradually disintegrating illusion. He felt the old man’s heartbeat becoming louder and more threatening, pushing him to the brink of madness. This upgrade is not only auditory, but also psychological, as his imagination constructs a reality that is increasingly detached from objective facts.

Another prominent psychological mechanism is denial and self-deception. The narrator repeatedly insists on his sanity, asserting, “Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.” Despite the irrationality of his actions, he tries to convince both himself and the reader that he is acting rationally.

### 3.3. The Shattering of the Mirror

In the Tell-Tale Heart, the protagonist’s carefully constructed self-identity is shattered by subsequent events, ultimately leading to a complete mental breakdown.

The self identity constructed by the narrator is built on a fragile foundation of control and deception. He said, “I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him.” However, the increasingly strong heartbeat became unbearable. This ruthless auditory hallucination reminded him of his crimes and the impossibility of concealing them. The reality of his actions struck him, shattering the illusion of control he had always maintained.

“I can no longer deceive myself, my psychological defense has collapsed.” The narrator reached a critical point, constantly reminding him of the heartbeat which forced him to face the truth. In a moment of despair, he pointed to the floor where the body was hidden and confessed, “Here! - It’s in the room! - His blood spilled on the floor!” This act of revelation marked the ultimate collapse of his fabricated self-identity and revealed the depth of his psychological pain.

With the collapse of self-identity, the narrator’s entire spiritual world also disintegrates. He lost his mirror and fell into a state of despair and fear. The story ends with the narrator’s confession, which not only exposes the crime but also exposes the depth of his psychological turmoil. His mirror like shattered self-image left him without a stable sense of self. At the same time, this also indicates the

destructive consequences of the narrator's actions and the fragility of the identity he constructs.

Different critics have expressed different views on the increasingly loud heart-beat at the end of the story. In Zimmerman's view, he emphasized that "unless his ear is attached to the old man's chest, he can't hear such a sound [9]." Therefore, some critics think that this sound is the sound of insects on the wall. Others think it's just an illusion of the abnormal narrator. There is no doubt that even if the narrator has keen hearing, he can't hear the heartbeat of the dead. In fact, what the narrator hears in this process is his own heartbeat. Connected with his conscience or guilt is the narrator's own beating heart.

Finally, the narrator removed the floor and admitted the murder. In essence, it is the narrator's self that defeats evil after repeated modification. This ending is quite similar to the black cat in this story: the murderer gloated in front of the police and even rapped at the scene while carrying the body, leaving no trace. However, unexpectedly, there was a black cat screaming inside the wall, which led to the arrest and hanging of the murderer. The cry of a black cat is actually sub-consciously imagined by the protagonist under high mental pressure. In a word, it is the "self" in the mirror that awakens the well-structured and precious conscience in the narrator's heart, which leads to the exposure of this seemingly unfounded murder.

#### 4. Deep Reflection after the Shattering of the Mirror

The protagonist's actions in "The Tell-Tale Heart" can be directly correlated with Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. Just as the infant experiences a false sense of mastery over its reflection, the protagonist believes he can control his environment by eliminating the old man's gaze. His meticulous planning of the murder—described as "how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation"—reflects a narcissistic illusion of control, akin to the infant's satisfaction with its mirror image. However, this illusion is shattered when the protagonist hears the old man's heartbeat, which symbolizes the return of the repressed reality. This moment parallels the infant's eventual realization that the mirror image is not a true extension of the self, leading to a crisis of identity.

While Lacan's mirror stage theory has been widely applied in literary analysis, some critics argue that its psychological framework may oversimplify the complexities of literary texts. For instance, Fredric Jameson points out that Lacanian concepts, while useful, can sometimes lead to reductive interpretations that ignore the social and historical context of a work [10]. In the case of "The Tell-Tale Heart," however, the mirror stage theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the protagonist's psychological disintegration, as it aligns closely with the narrative's focus on self-perception and identity.

Even though protagonist's crimes are unforgivable and irreparable. The narrator's final decision to confess shows his desire for redemption. His admission of guilt suggests that he was seeking some form of catharsis or release from the tor-

ment of his conscience. This desire for redemption, even in the face of serious consequences, highlights the human tendency to seek forgiveness and closure, regardless of the outcome.

The psychological disintegration of the protagonist in “The Tell-Tale Heart” serves as a microcosm of broader human struggles with identity and control. His descent into madness highlights the fragility of the human psyche when confronted with internal and external pressures. This narrative resonates with universal themes of guilt, paranoia, and the desire for redemption, which are central to the human condition. By examining the protagonist’s psychological breakdown through the lens of Lacan’s mirror stage theory, we gain insight into the ways in which individuals construct and deconstruct their sense of self in response to external stimuli. This analysis not only deepens our understanding of Poe’s work but also invites reflection on the psychological mechanisms that govern human behavior in general.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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