

Title:

[Authorities in Question: 'Unusual' Narrators in Tales by Edgar Allan Poe]

Contents:

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literary Reference.....	1
3.1. Dreamer and Visionary.....	2
3.2. The "Impossible" Narrator.....	4
3.3. The Narrator – A Liar ?.....	6
4. Conclusion.....	8
Bibliography.....	11

## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that Edgar Allan Poe was one of the most influential American writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His impact can be measured by tracing the literary influence he had on succeeding generations of writers as well as by regarding the responses to his work. Whether plots and topics, characters or narrative structures are concerned, it was Poe who put up high standards for each of them.

This is also true for the construction of narrators. In some of his tales, Poe introduces narrators who seem to fit in the scheme of 'ordinary' first-person narrators at first sight, but who turn out not to be quite as trustworthy as the reader may expect. It is the topic of this essay to examine Poe's tendency to play with the reader's idea of narrators. For this purpose, it will be necessary both to have a look at the views of scholars dealing with Poe's narrative strategies and to deal with some of his tales in detail.

## 2. Literary Reference

During the preparations for this essay I came across numerous publications that deal with the narrators in certain tales by Poe. Most of them focus on certain aspects of Poe's narrative strategy, and some emphasize his use of unpredictable and unreliable narrators.

Some scholars point out the mediatory quality of some of Poe's narrators and argue that they bear resemblance to dreamers and visionaries in texts by E.T.A. Hoffmann and others.<sup>1</sup> Dreamers, however, cannot be considered fully responsible for the factual "truth" of their narrative, and thus can be regarded as related to the group of obviously unreliable narrators.

Other scholars stress the impossibility of the narrative situation. Being dead or on the verge of dying, the narrators in some of Poe's tales thus question the probability of their own existence. Again, the reader's trust in a person that is either dead or otherwise unlikely to narrate a story is probably limited.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gisela Vitt-Maucher, "Träumer und Phantast als narratives Medium bei Hoffmann, Poe, Dostojewski und Stolper", in: *E.T.A. Hoffmann – Jahrbuch*, Bd. 1 (1992-93), Berlin: Erich Schmidt, p. 174-183.

The most obvious cases of a lack of narrative authority, however, are to be found in those tales in which the narrator gets tangled up in contradictions or is apparently lying. Supposing that Poe was a thorough author it is interesting to regard these stories as a departure from the norm of authorial narrators who "deserve" the trust of their readers in the traditional sense.

Another group of essays deals with some narrators' tendency to draw attention to "what happens in them" rather than to what they seem to point to in their narrative.<sup>2</sup> This attitude can be regarded as another way of Poe's undermining of his narrators' authority, as, to the reader, the factual content of the narrator's story is less important than *how* it is told.

Having introduced a set of different types of 'unreliable' narrators, we can now focus on some stories in which the lack of reliability is evident to a high degree.

### 3.1. Dreamer and Visionary

As far as the mediatory quality of some of Poe's narrators is concerned, it seems that the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" is a good example to demonstrate what Gisela Vitt-Maucher calls "alternative Zustände der menschlichen Vernunft"<sup>3</sup>.

In the second paragraph of the tale, the narrator establishes himself as a formerly ill, but now reconvalescent man who indulges in studying the crowd that passes in front of him. In his contemplation, he notices his ability to characterize people by their appearance. After some successful attempts to classify and rank his objects of examination, he gets stuck at the sight of one man whose personality and profession he cannot unfold.

In her examination of the tale Vitt-Maucher arrives at the conclusion that the personal state of the observer and the content of his narrative are interdependent:

---

<sup>2</sup> For example Ronald Bieganowski, "The Self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher'", in: *American Literature*, Vol. 60 (1988), Durham (North Carolina): Duke University Press, pp. 175-187, quotation p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Vitt-Maucher, p. 175.

Hier wird [...] die sonderbare Begegnung erst ermöglicht durch den Geisteszustand des Ich-Erzählers: Rekonvaleszent nach langer Krankheit beschreibt er seinen Zustand.<sup>4</sup>

The man's exaggerated sensitivity that results from his regained health leads to astonishing findings in respect of the crowd's character, but concerning the odd man, it fails. Nevertheless, the narrator's vivid senses are working on:

"This old man," I said at length, "is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd.* [...]"<sup>5</sup>

The fact that the narrator is constantly interpreting the surrounding reality while he at least partially seems to be in an overwrought state establishes an awkward tension. On the one hand, he is the exclusive mediator between the story and the reader, and the instance that we must trust if we want to follow the story. On the other hand, the unlikely exaggeration of the narrator's sensual abilities and his manic urge to follow the man on his way through the city make it seem at least doubtful that the narrator is really as responsible as his position would demand. Is he fully convalescent at all? The mention of his long disease at the beginning of the tale echoes in the reader's mind, and the narrator's authority in terms of depicting a reality as little clouded as possible may finally be shaken.

This effect is common to many of Poe's stories, although the narrator of this tale is far from being a liar or a wanton manipulator. However, if we follow Tobin Siebers' claim that "the narrator of the fantastic tale is unreliable by definition"<sup>6</sup>, we can draw the line from the slightly overheated fantast in "The Man of the Crowd" to the more obviously unreliable narrators that will be dealt with in the following examples.

---

<sup>4</sup> Vitt-Maucher, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, London: Everyman's Library (1945), p. 109 (emphasis by the author).

<sup>6</sup> Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1984), p.76, quoted after: Tracy Ware, "The Two Stories of 'William Wilson'", in: *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 26 (1989), pp. 43-48, quotation p. 44.

### 3.2. The “Impossible” Narrator

The obvious paradox of a narrator who – under rational circumstances – would not have been able to tell the story he is telling is used by Poe in a few of his tales. It seems that “The Masque of the Red Death” is a good example for this phenomenon: a story that is narrated by a voice that cannot have survived the events it has witnessed.

In the story we learn that Prince Prospero has his abbey sealed scrupulously, and that at the end the dreaded plague grabs hold of all members of his court:

“And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay.”<sup>7</sup>

In an essay on the narrator of this tale, David R. Dudley points out that he reveals himself only three times within the story:

“But first let me tell you of the rooms in which [the masquerade] was held.”<sup>8</sup>

“And the music ceased, as I have told [...].”<sup>9</sup>

“In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted [...].”<sup>10</sup>

If we follow Dudley’s assumption that Poe has not simply been careless in this case, there can be no doubt that the assumption of a narrator who survives his own death among the guests of Prospero’s masquerade is a constructed paradox. As far as his narrative authority is concerned, there are three possible consequences:

Either the narrator is a liar, and he has been able to quit the palace. Leaving the palace after the devastating appearance of the Red Death would not only question the narrator’s statement that everyone within the palace dies, but also undermine the logic of the story.

Second, it is possible that while writing his account of the events, the narrator is on the brink of death. By referring to “MS. Found in a Bottle” and

---

<sup>7</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, pp. 206f.

<sup>8</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 205.

"Shadow – A Parable" Dudley shows that in fact "many of Poe's tales are arguably *about* their own existence after the death of their narrators"<sup>11</sup>, but he also points out that there is a hint in the text that makes this interpretation unlikely in this case. In a description of the costumes we find the comment that "there were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm – much of what has been since seen in *Hernani*."<sup>12</sup> If we agree with Dudley that by *Hernani* the play by Victor Hugo is meant, this reference is startling in fact. In addition to the fact that the narrator refers to a play that was first performed around 1830, it is the verb tense that establishes "once and for all the narrator's survival beyond the end of the story."<sup>13</sup>

The third possible response to the paradox is the assumption that the narrator has supernatural qualities. If we imagine a ghostlike being that is able to cross natural as well as narrative boundaries it is possible to maintain a certain logic. Apart from the fact, however, that a new paradox is established by creating a supernatural, irrational instance in order to maintain the narrative's logic, it is questionable whether the voice that addresses the reader can be imagined to be that of a ghost.

No matter which of the above readings is taken to be the most appropriate one, it is obvious that the narrator in "The Masque of the Red Death" is not a narrator in the traditional way. His authority as a messenger of facts is cracked: both liars and moribunds are not quite the persons we would trust when it comes to reporting facts objectively. Ghostlike beings certainly are not eligible candidates, either, as they elude the rules and duties of the rational world.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> David R. Dudley, "Dead or Alive: The Booby-Trapped Narrator of Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death'", in: *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 30 (1993), pp. 169-173, quotation: p. 169 (emphasis by the author).

<sup>12</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup> Dudley, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> In his essay, Dudley offers a final approach to the understanding of the narrative paradox on a theoretical, "meta-narrative" level. This reading, however, can be neglected in this context. Like the others, it does not support the narrator's authority.

### 3.3. The Narrator – A Liar?

As we have seen in the previous example, Poe's narrators can be interpreted to be lying. While in "The Masque of the Red Death" the assumption of a lying narrator was one among several readings of the text, there are tales in which a dubious handling of truth is more obvious. As an example, "Ligeia" will serve, as well as references to the narrator in "The Black Cat".

In "Ligeia", a man tells the story of his lost love and of his second wife, both of which deceased under peculiar circumstances. The first quarter of the story is dedicated to a highly detailed description of Ligeia, followed by the process of her dying. After the report of Ligeia's death, the narrator puts more effort into the description of the refurbished abbey than into describing his second wife Rowena. The rest of the story is covered by the death of Rowena and the strange happenings that follow it.

It is striking how the narrator tries to convince the reader of his inability to tell the story properly. The first sentences establish the fragmentary memory that he claims to have:

I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering.<sup>15</sup>

The self-reducing tone that appears in the opening sentences remain visible throughout the tale. Apart from the physical and personal appearance of Ligeia there are not many details in the narrator's speech that he suggests the reader to take for granted. In respect of Ligeia's "*person*", however, the narrator's memory "fails [him] not".<sup>16</sup> It is this dubious contradiction that arouses the reader's suspicion.

In support of his thesis that the narrator has murdered Ligeia as well as his second wife Rowena, Terrence J. Matheson suggests that the narrator's purpose in drawing the reader's attention to his grief-stricken state is designed merely "to extract sympathy from us, before we learn anything about his behaviour, by depicting himself as a victim of hardship so intense that his

---

<sup>15</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 156.

memory has been enfeebled"<sup>17</sup>. It is curious that the narrator's memory fails him even in aspects we would consider more impressive:

How poignant, then, *must have been* the grief with which, after some years, I beheld my well-grounded expectations take wings to themselves and fly away!<sup>18</sup>

As this sentence introduces the description of Ligeia's illness and death, it is questionable how "poignant" the narrator's grief really was. The lack of congruence between the narrator's claim and the underlying meaning of his sentence leads Matheson to the conclusion that the narrator merely pretends to have been mourning for years while in fact he used Ligeia's money to purchase an abbey and indulged in a rather decadent lifestyle, as the narrator states in another sentence. Regardless of the question whether we follow Matheson's thesis that the narrator is a double murderer, it is obvious that Poe has inserted certain "weaknesses" into the narration which "often lead us in a direction contrary to the one the narrator intends."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, one can assume in the narrator's text a strategy that aims at obscuring the facts. With the reader noticing the strategy behind the narrator's claim of not remembering well enough, the truth is re-established, but the narrator's authority is irretrievably lost.

In Poe's stories, there are more examples of narrators who seem to have something to hide from the reader. One of them can be found in "The Black Cat", a tale narrated by a condemned man on the eve of his execution for the murder of his wife. In her examination of the narrative structure of that story, Susan Amper has pointed out that once the credibility of the narrator is doubted, the reader is able to discover the whole truth. In this particular reading of the text, the reader advances to an (armchair) detective who searches for circumstantial evidence and examines scrupulously each of the narrator's statements.<sup>20</sup> As in "Ligeia", the narrator can either be taken serious, which would affect the story in the way that it would have to be read as an unsolvable mystery, or the narrator's credibility can be queried, which

---

<sup>17</sup> Terrence J. Matheson, "The Multiple Murders in 'Ligeia': A New Look at Poe's Narrator", in: *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 13, Number 3 (1982), pp. 279-289, quotation: p. 281.

<sup>18</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 160 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Matheson, p. 281.

would lead to a new and more logical reading but would wreck the narrator's authority and the reader's belief in his integrity. Similar to the narrator of "Ligeia", however, it is the narrator himself who nurtures the doubt about his credibility. Again it is the first two sentences that hint at the possibility of a "lying" narrator:

For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence.<sup>21</sup>

"Belief", in fact, is necessary to follow the narration of the condemned murderer, and it is necessary in general if a "proper" relation between the reader and a narrator shall be established. The fact that Poe voluntarily abandons the narrator as an authoritative and trustworthy instance allows an additional interpretation of what actually happened in the stories, and thus encourages a special kind of "reading between the lines" that draws attention to the tales' complex and multivoiced texture.

#### 4. Conclusion

All of the above examples are connected in the way that they bear narrators who differ from authorial narrators in the traditional sense. If we take F.K.Stanzel's concept of narrative types as a model, the narrators in most of Poe's tales belong to the "Ich-Erzähler" group that is also referred to as "first-person narrators". This type of narrator differs by definition from "authorial" narrators who remain outside the actual action of a story. Therefore, the term "authorial" as it is used in this context refers to a certain degree of authority rather than to the exact classification provided by Stanzel's model. First-person narrators can be 'authorial' in so far as they usually have a hold on the events that they narrate. As they usually are involved in the story, they are assumed to be in authority over at least parts of the narrated action. The first-person narrators in "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat", however, seem to have grip

---

<sup>20</sup> Susan Amper, "Untold Story: The Lying Narrator in 'The Black Cat'", in: *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 29 (1992), pp. 475-485.

<sup>21</sup> Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, p. 518.

on the narrated action just as little as on themselves. They are failing to be 'authorial' in the way that they lack the overview of the plot and the essential details of their emotional inside.

On the assumption that Poe composed and revised his tales thoroughly it seems unlikely that the fragmentary authorities of some of his narrators are merely literary accidents. On the contrary, once they are perceived as deviations from self-controlled, confident and trustworthy story-tellers they can be recognized as stylistic devices. As I have tried to demonstrate in the course of this essay, the device may work on different levels. By inserting little discrepancies into the narrative, Poe raises the reader's mistrust in the narrator's integrity. This modification of the reader's attitude towards the narrator gives way to an additional reading of the text which can take the story into an entirely different direction. In the cases of "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat", the re-definition of the reader's position towards the narrator leads to findings that are miles apart from the original interpretation. In other cases, the narrator's claim to merely have a limited overview or fragmentary memories of the events serves the reader's impression of his unpredictability. Of course, the memory lapse, too, has serious consequences as to our relations with the narrator: How can we put our trust in the narration of a story if the narrator is not capable of recollecting even his personal feelings?

In summary it can be said that each of Poe's ways to modify the traditional position of the narrator results in the increase of distance between the reader and the narrator. While narrators who are dead or on the verge of death may not seem plausible but can be tolerated within the realms of fiction, the reports of dreamers who obviously suffer from either an extraordinary imagination or an alarming lack of realism make us more vigilant. The suspicion that he might not tell the truth finally is devastating: By letting the reader know that he is not in control of the entire situation, the narrator fails to establish the authority that traditional narrators would feature as one of their most essential characteristics.

It seems that the cracks and contradictions in many of Poe's narrator-characters are highly modern, and that his tales therefore could as well have been written after the entry of psychological theory into literature. In fact,

Poe not only employs the deficiencies of his narrators very consciously, he also deliberately opens his tales to further interpretation by abandoning narrative authority and textual unambiguity. These characteristics truly are modern features, and they demonstrate once again both the extent to which Poe was ahead of his time and the extraordinary skillfulness of his writing

### Bibliography:

Susan Amper, "Untold Story: The Lying Narrator in 'The Black Cat'", in: *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 29 (1992), pp. 475-485.

Ronald Bieganowski, "The Self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher'", in: *American Literature*, Vol. 60 (1988), Durham (North Carolina): Duke University Press, pp. 175-187.

Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, London: Everyman's Library (1945).

David R. Dudley, "Dead or Alive: The Booby-Trapped Narrator of Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death'", in: *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 30 (1993), pp. 169-173.

Terrence J. Matheson, "The Multiple Murders in 'Ligeia': A New Look at Poe's Narrator", in: *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 13, Number 3 (1982), pp. 279-289.

Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (1987).

Franz K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (1995).

Gisela Vitt-Maucher, "Träumer und Phantast als narratives Medium bei Hoffmann, Poe, Dostojewski und Stolper", in: *E.T.A. Hoffmann – Jahrbuch*, Bd. 1 (1992-93), Berlin: Erich Schmidt.

Tracy Ware, "The Two Stories of 'William Wilson'", in: *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 26 (1989), pp. 43-48.