

Buried in the Bedroom: Bearing Witness to Incest in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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Gothic horror's association with the unspeakable is nowhere more apparent than in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." The story's narrator himself cannot satisfactorily articulate his motivation for stalking and murdering an apparently kind old man. Because the "mad" narrator's explanation of his motive--"I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture--a pale blue eye, with a film over it"--begs to be analyzed in terms of its repressed and displaced meanings, the tale has been, over the course of more than 70 years, the subject of psychological readings that try to uncover motives for murder that the narrator cannot reveal (792). In this essay, I argue that these readings, while at times astute and even profound, ultimately fail to hear vital information that the narrator is trying to provide, information vital to understanding not only his motives, but also to Poe's challenges to the limits of the gothic genre's ability to represent sexual deviance and its effects. Recognizing how "The Tell-Tale Heart," through its sexual subtext, develops the gothic tradition also compels us to recognize this story as a quintessential example of Poe's use of layered allegory, which, as Brett Zimmerman has argued, he buries deeply in stories to camouflage perverse meanings that society cannot accept ("Allegoria" 11).

Among the many critical attempts to understand the murder in "The Tell-Tale Heart," a number of landmark essays argue that Poe offers an extreme dramatization of what are actually quite normative conflicts: whether sexual developmental conflict as theorized by Freud, as Marie Bonaparte argued in 1934; or social conflict as theorized by Lacan, as Robert Con Davis argued in 1984; or gender conflict, as Gita Rajan argued in 1988. By contrast, this essay argues that "The Tell-Tale Heart" dramatizes an attempt to bear witness to a traumatic event so difficult for narrator and readers to re-embody in language that it remains, to this day, excluded in professional readings of this tale, and conspicuously underrepresented in psychological literature as well. This tale, like many other gothic narratives before it, explores incest. But unlike Poe's earlier "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which Scott Peeples and others have recognized references to brother-sister incest, "The Tell-Tale Heart" has been overlooked as an incest narrative (85). Its symbolic references to incest have remained repressed because they concern the type of incest that today still most strongly resists recognition and articulation--male-on-male incest, and, more specifically, father-son incest. Poe pushes gothic fiction's exploration of illicit sexuality further than anyone before him, burying within the tale a type of incest that we, like Poe's narrator, have historically found too horrifying to name, either in literary criticism, psychological literature, or society at large.

This essay, then, analyzes "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a story in which the traumatic act of father-son incest is re-enacted without being revealed, either to the narrator, his victim, or his audience. "Trauma," writes Cathy Caruth, "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but in the way that its very unassimilated nature--the way it was precisely not known in the first instance--returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). In his

contradictory plea to be heard and inability to be articulate, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" acts out and then tells a story of trauma that does what Caruth argues all stories of trauma do, "simultaneously defy and demand our witness" (5). The tale, then, is actually a retelling of a recent murderous attempt to "tell" incest that alternately functions on literal and symbolic levels. It is "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). The narrator, who exhibits clinically validated signs of incestuous abuse, attests as loudly as he can to what is not known by enacting a narrative that requires killing the incest father and mimicking the incest father at the same time. Given the longstanding cultural prohibitions against naming male-on-male incest that have only recently begun to weaken, it is not surprising that we have not been able to hear this story's incestuous subtext. As a result, the father-perpetrator remains protected even as he is punished, more than a century and a half after Poe wrote this tale.

Approaching this story as both a literal and symbolic representation of the dynamics of incest, and especially father-son incest, sheds a strong new light on this tale's central crime and its seemingly disconnected details: the old man's lack of proper name or title; the narrator's association between himself and carrion as he is watched by the vulture eye; the physical location, timing, and method of the murder; the degree and type of emotion associated with the narrator's revenge; images of dismemberment after the murder; the narrator's conflicted impulses to hide and to confess; and ultimately, the blurred psychological boundaries that become apparent when the narrator is unable to make appropriate distinctions between his body and the old man's at the end of the story.

Before fleshing out these connections, however, it is important to consider the sociopolitical context that has helped make the incestuous subtext of Poe's tale so difficult to read for so long.

Newspaper accounts of incest appear only intermittently during the mid-nineteenth century, appearing most often in the form of brief mentions in court statistics or lists of arrests and convictions. Infrequently reported, incest was assumed to be a very infrequent occurrence in the United States. Irene Quenzler Brown and Richard D. Brown note that "incest cases went unpublished in the printed annals of American crime up through 1805. [...] And in the published records of Britain, which included hundreds more capital cases, there was only a single father-daughter rape [...] in 1753" (113). This lack of reported cases led the seasoned judge at Ephraim Wheeler's incest trial of 1805 to declare, "this is, probably, the only instance of the kind that has ever occurred since the world began" (112). Fifty years later, a decade after Poe revised "The Tell-Tale Heart," there was only one case involving incest tried in court in all of Long Island, New York, as opposed to four involving murder and 108 involving nonsexual assault ("Long").

When a credible report of incest did appear during the nineteenth century, it was typically couched in emotional rhetoric that displayed anxiety about introducing an unspeakable crime into public discourse. Consider the following account from the 13 August 1857 edition of the *New York Daily Times*, which picked up a story from the *Newburyport Herald* (MA) entitled "Revolting--Rape, Incest, and Preparations for Murder":

On Monday morning the court opened with an examination of one of the greatest, most terrible, most revolting crimes that was ever committed in this neighborhood--an offence so against nature and decency--so blasphemous of God, and so odious to man, that in three quarters of the States of the Union the man never would have come to a legal investigation, but the people would have hanged him to the first tree or lamp-post. JOSHUA GOODRICH, a native of Alfred, Me., [...] was charged by his daughter with incest, and with rape [...].

Were it not that we are informed by the officers that plenty of corroborative evidence is at hand, we could hardly believe this story. It is inconceivable that such a wretch could live and breathe in human shape [...]. A small part of what is charged would prove him to be the embodiment of total depravity. (5)

Other reports through the second half of the nineteenth century similarly demonize the incest perpetrator with words such as "inhuman brute" ("Inhuman"), "frightful depravity" ("Frightful"), "bestiality" ("Beastiality"), and "fiendish" ("Fiendish"). Although bearing witness to the presence of incest in society, the rhetoric of the accounts systematically attempts to deny that incest occurs in human society at all.

Although reports of incest today have become frequent enough that most do not find it "inconceivable that [a perpetrator] could live and breathe in human shape," incest is still a charged subject alternately evoking rage, denial, and disbelief ("Revolting" 5). In *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics*, a history of attitudes toward reports of incest, Louise Armstrong recounts that, as recently as twenty years ago, health professionals believed "that incest was, in fact, extremely rare ('perhaps one in a million') (24). Earlier in the twentieth century, Freud himself "expressed embarrassment at his credulity in having believed stories of sexual seduction in childhood," even in "cases in which a patient's account of prior sexual abuse was corroborated by a covictim, a witness or by the adult participant," and even though "he never published a case of corroborated false account of sexual abuse" (Goodwin 40). Rather than credit the apparent relationship that seemed to be exhibited in his patients between neurosis or psychosis and domestic sexual abuse, he developed his oedipal theories, arguing that "such complaints represented oedipal fantasies that had been disguised as memories of actual sexual contact with the father" (39).

More recently, even as Western countries have, in fits and starts punctuated by backlash, become more aware of domestic sexual violence against women and girls, all types of sexual violence against men have remained largely discredited by society and repressed or suppressed by victims. In the Preface to *Male Victims of Sexual Assault*, published in England in 2000, Gillian Mezey writes that "male rape is a taboo subject; it happens but it is concealed by the victims [...] and by a society that is not prepared to listen. Men and boys who are sexually assaulted encounter issues similar to those encountered by women 20 years ago. They face skepticism, criticism and disbelief, and there

are very few sources of support or services specifically for them" (King, Coxell, and Mezey i). Michael B. King concurs:

Until recently there was little acknowledgement that men could suffer sexual molestation. Although sexual assault was recognized as a problem in prisons and other all-male institutions, sexual assault of men in the community was thought to be an unusual event. [...] This was due in part to a narrow legal definition of rape in English law and the legal systems of many states in the USA. In English law, for example, the term 'rape' was restricted to forced penile penetration of the vagina [...]. [It was not until] 1994 that the offence of rape was extended to include anal or vaginal penetration by a penis. (Mezey and King 1)

Bill Watkins reports that although "it has been suggested that girls are abused [more frequently than boys] in a ratio of 9:1, [...] other contemporary studies [...] indicate that sexual abuse of boys has been underestimated and that rates of abuse in girls are only a little higher than in boys" (38). It is consistent, then, that the first mass market resource for men sexually abused as children, Mike Lew's *Victims No Longer*, was not published until 1988.

More taboo than even male-on-male sexual assault is incest between boys and a father or father surrogate. Like "all forms of intrafamilial abuse," male-on-male abuse is "under-reported because of the greater secrecy and the intense fears of the consequences that surround the abuse. [Yet, in a 1988 study] of sexually abused 3-8 year-old boys, 95 per cent of the abuse was intrafamilial" (Watkins 43). Mark Williams notes that the first published medical report of a case of father-son incest (which challenged its unspeakable nature by dismissing incest as generally not traumatic for children) was not made until 1937 (Williams 167; Pleck 156). Writing 39 years later in 1976, George A. Awad still could only find two anecdotal reports and two substantiated case studies in preparation for his own case study of father-son incest. Watkins notes that psychological literature continues to reinforce this silence: "There are few studies of reports about father-son abuse, even though fathers are cited as the most frequent abusers of boys, including sons. [...] This striking discrepancy [has been explained] in terms of two moral codes: the one against incest and the one that previously existed against homosexuality" (47).

In parallel fashion to the medical community, historians such as Linda Gordon and Peter Bardaglio, who have attempted to reconstruct the history of incest in the United States, have focused almost exclusively on sexual violence against women. Literary studies of incest have followed suit: none of the excellent work of critics such as Janice Doane, Devon Hodges, and Jane Ford has examined literary figurations of male-on-male incest. (1) Doane and Hodges themselves point out that "sexual abuse survivor stories by adult males, long concealed by homophobia [...] are just now being widely explored" (144).

Within this social and political context, then, reading Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" without regard to recent developments in our understanding of incest and its effects is to reinforce a pattern of repression and displacement concerning a very disturbing level of meaning in the text. For the remainder of this essay, I will outline what the tale means against the backdrop of the emergent conversation about male-on-male incest, and, more specifically, father-son incest. In doing so, I will follow "recent interdisciplinary trauma studies, arguing that [...] traumatic events are by definition events that rupture the narrative continuity of psychic and cultural realities [...] [and thus that] 'knowing' trauma occurs through its figuration as testimony--there can be no representation of traumatic truth not formed through figurative, rather than literal, reference" (Harkins 285). Such a reading of the tale's figurative testimony requires the examination of three shifting roles in the story: first, the narrator as a formerly victimized child exhibiting neurotic and, at times, psychotic symptoms as a result of his incest trauma; second, the narrator as a perpetrator re-enacting his abuse narrative by making the old man suffer what he suffered; and finally, the old man as a terrified victim of the narrator's currently re-enacted threat of incest.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" begins with the narrator's blurted exclamation of the word "TRUE!", and the rest of the story is, indeed, an anxious search for truth. The search is not for the identity of the murderer as in most puzzling tales involving homicide, however, but for his motives. As the story begins, the implied listeners have concluded that the narrator is "mad," but lack understanding beyond that. We sit silently, listening to a narrator who cannot coherently explain his reasons for committing a shocking murder to which he has confessed:

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that 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. (792)

This passage is, in fact, chock full of symbolically displaced clues as to the murderer's motivations. And yet to begin our detective work here, with this enigmatic passage, is not only dangerously risky--fraught as it is with condensed images and no context for decoding them--but unnecessary. Later in the story, the narrator gives us a pivotal clue that sets up the frame in which his actions should be understood:

For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening;-- just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death-watches in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief--oh, no!--it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. (794)

In this passage, the narrator explains that he is making the old man experience what he has experienced. He is, in other words, enacting a reversal. This is the clearest statement the narrator can make about his motivation: the act he commits must then be considered carefully, as it mimics a terrifying situation that he has repeatedly experienced and to which he is trying to give closure. It is a situation experienced at night, when no one who can help is awake and available. It is a situation calling for hyper-vigilance in what should be the private haven of one's own bedroom. It is a situation that the narrator associates with the sound of the "death-watch" insect, which Mabbott and others have noted makes rhythmic sounds in anticipation of copulation as part of its mating ritual (Peeples 95). And it is a situation in which the narrator felt "overcharged with awe"--a carefully chosen phrase suggesting the presence of someone with a significant degree of power and position relative to the speaker.

Although these conditions alone, taken together, strongly suggest incest, the unusual circumstances surrounding the method of the murder also suggest, in displaced fashion, the sexual nature of the unspeakable crime being re-enacted: "In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. [...] First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings" (795-96). Bonaparte and Benfey have both noted a lack of verisimilitude in making the bed the murder weapon, and they are right. However, rather than symbolizing oedipal instincts, as Bonaparte argues, or a generalized fear of intimacy, as Benfey contends, the bed functions in a more literal way: one of the sexual predator's tools--the victim's bed--is used to smother the predator-turned-victim. Furthermore, the dismemberment speaks to the narrator's outrage over the former objectification of his body into parts that are used for the perpetrator's pleasure; in turn, he finds pleasure in the crime he is committing. (2) Many clinicians believe that children who are repeatedly abused lose the ability to feel empathy for others, here represented in the narrator's ability to feel only delight in his own power and "sagacity" before, during, and after the murder (Ferentz). Finally, he appropriately hides the body in the bedroom, which is the place wherein the attacker tries to keep his secret concealed.

It is not only the murder itself and the treatment of the victim's body afterwards that speaks to the sexualized nature of the crime, however. The narrator also delights in recounting his stalking behaviour, which is a common prelude to both physical and sexual assault (Stalking). The narrator's sexualized description of his stalking activity foreshadows and reinforces the murder's sexual subtext: "And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it--oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly--very, very slowly so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep" (792-93). The narrator's emphasis on the penetration of his head into the old man's private space--and, specifically, thrusting his head in with an emphasis on keeping the illicit penetration as secret as possible, even to the victim himself--mirrors the intrafamilial incest perpetrator's tactics, which are to simultaneously physically violate a vulnerable family member and to try to contain the violation at the same time. Unlike a molester who attacks outside of his own family or immediate social unit, the incest perpetrator must construct a double life, in which an outward daily normalcy works as a defense against suspicion, at times even causing the victim to consciously deny what is happening (Courtois 130). The narrator revels in how convincingly he was able to lead this double life, noting, "With what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him" (792). The contradictory signals that an outwardly nurturing incest parent gives a child generate an array of devastating symptoms, not the least of which is repression along with an unidentified source of dis-ease. Significantly, "a recent study [...] revealed a 37% incidence of interfamilial sexual abuse in children and adolescents who had been hospitalized for psychiatric conditions that initially appeared to be unrelated to sexual abuse" (Rosenzweig 56). Increasingly, the puzzling nature of the narrator's psychiatric condition itself makes sense as an integral part of the denial inherent in incest.

In light of the symbolically and metonymically significant actions and observations that suggest the narrator is trying to tell a tale of incest, his exhibition of a carefully selected combination of symptoms that would, over a century later, be identified as consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder makes his status as incest survivor even more likely. His very first words are telling: "TRUE!--nervous--very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses--not destroyed--not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and the earth. I heard many things in hell" (792). In light of this opening admission, Jean Goodwin's report that "adult incest victims complain of being hyperalert (76%) and nervous (63%)" is particularly significant (196). They resemble Freud's hysterics in their mental sensitiveness and hyperactivity (Courtois 130). In one study, "visual, olfactory and auditory flashbacks were present [in all 10 incest victims] and were often identical with recurrent nightmare images. Six of the 10 had complained of hearing voices; all heard the perpetrator, and some heard other voices as well" (Goodwin 199). "Post traumatic reactions [...] often affect sleep with both latency of sleep and a very restless and disturbed sleep pattern. Sometimes, sleep is broken by shouts and signs of high autonomic arousal" (Turner 99).

It is not only the narrator whom Poe depicts as nervous and having difficulty sleeping, of course; the old man, whom he mirrors, also displays these traits. We are told that his "shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers" and

that he wakes up and stays up when provoked by even the smallest noise (793). It is important to note again here how Poe's dramatization of an incest survivor in the process of reenacting his trauma makes us examine the characters in context of shifting roles: both the narrator and the old man alternately function as incest father and incest victim. Thus, it is significant that the old man's behaviour eerily mirrors that of 50 per cent of the former incest victims in one recent study, who "described barricading themselves in their blacked-out rooms at times when they were frightened by men," such as the robbers who the old man fears will steal something valuable from him in his bedroom (Goodwin 198).

The fluid roles between the narrator and the old man are especially significant in terms of the story's incestuous subtext, given that "there is a tendency among boy victims to recapitulate their own victimization, only this time with themselves in the role of perpetrator and someone else the victim. [...] One mechanism that would appear to facilitate the transition from victim to victimizer is 'identification with the aggressor'" (Watkins 54). This identification with the aggressor, a coping strategy that victims use to manage their rage, shame, and anxiety, is "a way of defending against the recognition of the trauma of the abuse" (Etherington 51). It is also related to what psychoanalysis identifies as the normal developmental process of introjection--the internalization of a parent figure and his or her values, which leads to the formation of the superego or conscience. This idea of a parental introject helps explain the "psychic merging of killer and killed" that E. Arthur Robinson and Patrick F. Quinn both describe in their readings of "The Tell-Tale Heart" (Robinson 374). In cases of incest or other abuse, the parental introject becomes a part of the self that is loved and hated at the same time. Thus, the narrator loves and hates the old man at once, alternately treating him kindly, stalking him, and eventually killing him in an attempt to purge his own identity through projection and murder: "The resurgence of the beating heart shows that the horrors within himself, which the criminal attempted to identify with the old man and thus destroy, still live" (Robinson 376). Because Robinson and Quinn both emphasize the old man as a separate, even random, mirrored double of the self, they are forced to acknowledge that "what the Evil Eye represents that it so arouses the madman we do not know" (Robinson 377). An understanding of the old man as an abusive father figure, however, reveals him as uniquely triggering the narrator's anxieties about his own parental introject. In other words, the old man mirrors, because he has created, the internalized identity that the narrator seeks to punish and escape.

At this point, it is possible to return to the displaced clues the narrator gives us concerning his motivation for the murder: "Object there was none. [...] I loved the old man. [...] I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture--a pale blue eye, with a film over it" (792). The narrator identifies himself here both as being prey and being dead--the kind of food the predator vulture eats. This identifies the old man as a physical predator, and the narrator as someone who feels dead as a result of his stalking. Christine Courtois describes the feeling of deadness as one of the most common symptoms of sexual abuse: "In adulthood, the abuse survivor [...] may report self-estrangement and emotional deadness. His detachment may be the extension of the defensive repression and suppression of feelings that he learned in childhood. Additionally, it may be due to his fear that, if he does allow himself to feel, the feelings (especially anger) will be so intense that he will victimize others or go crazy"

(105). Victimization has also been described as a "break in the human lifeline" that may lead to the experiencing of one's social world as dead or constricted (113).

The emphasis on the vulture's eye, of course, further focuses our attention on the paralyzing experience of being subject to an inescapable, objectifying male gaze; the added detail that it is covered by a film reinforces both its one-sided nature and its corrupted (and corrupting) quality. Although arguing that the eye represents the madman's fears that the old man, a father figure, has simply seen "a forbidden [...] exercise of the [son's] libido," Daniel Hoffman significantly goes on to argue that, by striking the eye, the son strikes, symbolically, at the father's sexual power, noting that "the symbolic content of blinding has been self-evident since Oedipus inflicted it upon himself" (224, 226). According to Lisa Ferentz, creator of the certificate program in trauma treatment at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, images of eyes are often repeatedly drawn by sexual abuse survivors: "The eye can represent hypervigilance related to watching and waiting for the next abuse episode. It can also represent a lack of privacy and boundaries, a knowledge of being watched by the perpetrator." As in Rajan's reading of the narrator as a woman, the feminized narrator here attempts to reverse the gaze, showcasing its literal and symbolic macabre effects. Significantly, the narrator's sudden decision to use violence to "rid [himself] of the eye forever" (792) is consistent with male sexual abuse survivors' tendency to reassert their masculinity in inappropriately aggressive ways. Citing the research of C.N. Rogers and T. Terry, Watkins argues that this "counter-assertion of masculinity [...] may extend to aggressive sexual behaviour. The counter-response to powerlessness can also be aggression or excessive controlling behaviour. [...] The male victim of sexual abuse is even more intolerant of his helplessness than the female victim. [...] These externalized coping strategies are related to the transformation of the abused victim into abuser" (52-53).

The other significant wording used in the narrator's brief attempt to describe his motivation concerns his identification of his victim. Rather than describing his relationship to him, or at least giving us a name, he is simply an "old man" whom the narrator cannot name. In the context of incest, this at last makes sense. The narrator cannot articulate the intimacy that the word "father" connotes because of the profound betrayal that has occurred; the father, rather than compromising his son's masculinity, is supposed to bear the primary responsibility for affirming it. Not surprisingly, then, the reactions of boys who have been abused by their fathers tends to be particularly severe. Psychosis and homicidal feelings toward the father, though obviously not limited to male victims of incest, appear to afflict them with increased frequency (Courtois 64). In her survey of "classical clinical studies of adolescents who have committed parricide," Kathleen Heide found that "almost all reported cases involved sons [who had been] severely abused" (34). Typically, these homicidal feelings toward the perpetrator-father have surprised clinicians, in that many of the boys involved "had no history of delinquency [or] of violent, assaultive behavior" (Mones 36).

The final aspect of the story that must be reread in the context of incest is the narrator's final breakdown and confession. In this portion of his experience, the narrator acts in his role as victim. Both at the time of the murder and during the visit by the police afterwards, the narrator conflates his escalating heartbeat with his victim's. On a symbolic level, the narrator's inability to keep proper boundaries between his body and the old man's represents not

only the physical boundary violation of incest, but also the resulting blurred boundaries between self and other that incest victims experience psychologically:

A very young child needs to learn where his body begins and ends as part of identity formation, a recognition of 'self' as being separate from 'other.' When a child has been sexually abused at a very early age, he may feel as though he is symbiotically attached to his abuser, especially if his abuser is a parent. If the abuser is the same gender as the child or if the child is abused by parents, it may be that they will have a greater problem with self-differentiation and the establishment of a personal identity. (Etherington 175)

It is especially poignant that the narrator's point of conflated identity centres on the heart. This symbol of love and intimacy comes to signify the unnerving force of deepest love and intimacy betrayed. In addition to these symbolic meanings, the narrator's oversensitivity to his own beating heart and fear that it is the old man's echoes clinical findings that parricides abused as children are hypervigilant not only when their lives depend on it, but even after the homicide. They "may know that the threatening parent is dead but still fear the parent," afraid "that the parent may not be really dead" (Heide 73, 72).

This argument is not the first to offer a clinically oriented analysis of "The Tell-Tale Heart." Paige Matthey Bynum has convincingly shown that Poe's readers would have understood the narrator as suffering from "moral insanity," a controversial diagnosis (used as a defense in highly publicized murder trials) indicating that someone who could not distinguish between right and wrong could still function with intellectual and emotional faculties intact. Following Bynum's lead, Zimmerman offers a strong argument that Poe, a student of early medical insights that have led to our own contemporary understanding of paranoid schizophrenia, anticipates that diagnosis by portraying select symptoms of "moral insanity" in a paranoid schizophrenic narrator ("Moral"). This essay's argument, that the narrator suffers from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder commonly experienced by incest survivors, can, on one level, coexist alongside their arguments. As the history of psychiatric medicine attests, diagnoses change in subtle and profound ways as new data comes to light; furthermore, at any one time, identical symptoms can be related to different diagnoses. What is at stake in naming the narrator's mental illness--in choosing between the contemporary diagnoses of paranoid schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder--lies in the ramifications of each disorder's etiology. The causes of paranoid schizophrenia are internal and unidentified; in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, the exact opposite is true. While, as Bynum points out, it may be scarier to posit that mental illness is derived internally rather than from impersonal external influences such as "poisonous miasmas" or intentional choices such as "intellectual indulgence," it is scarier still to posit that its causes implicate people other than the one who has clearly suffered a breakdown--people who appear sane, even nurturing, in the public eye, but who commit domestic atrocities that remain hidden for years (149). In such a world, whom can one trust? And in a story where victim is also perpetrator, with whom can one safely identify, or even sympathize? This, I believe, is the

reason that the narrator's terrible secret has remained buried in what Poe would describe as "a very profound under-current" of the narrative for so long (Review 148). Despite what we now understand about the relative chances of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder to suffering from schizophrenia (the former is estimated to be about eight times more likely) and the cohesive set of sexually suggestive symbols and emblems saturating the text, we have resisted reading the tale in this way (American 466, 308).

As those professionally engaged with "The Tell-Tale Heart," we belong to one of several professional communities who have historically had trouble reading the reality of incest, and especially male-on-male incest. Consider the words of Iwan Bloch, a contemporary of Freud: "Children's declarations before the law are, for the truly experienced knower of children [...] without significance; all the more insignificant and all the more hollow the more often the child repeats the declaration and the more determined he is to stick to his statements" (qtd. in Goodwin 38-39). Although attitudes toward reports of incest are generally not as completely dismissive today, it is still true, some 160 years after Poe wrote his tale, that children tend to believe that "friendly adults and law enforcement officials [are] powerless to help" (Mones 36). Writing in 1987 for the US Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, Roland Summit emphasized that professionals often end up protecting themselves, rather than victims, in a culture that still denies the reality of sexual abuse and especially incest: "To the present time [...] those who call attention to the hazards of child molestation and those who develop techniques identifying the signs of sexual abuse have been ridiculed and disgraced" (qtd. in Armstrong 180-81).

The law enforcement officers who appear at the end of the tale, then, are emblematic of a generalized professional response. Surely the narrator is speaking as a victim when he rails against the police as "hypocrites" who will not themselves expose the truth: "They were making a mockery of my horror!--this I thought, and this I think. [...] I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! [...] 'Villains! I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed!--tear up the planks!--here, here!--it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (797). The narrator actually wants the law to know the incest secret to which his actions--the mute, embodied telling of his trauma--point, and shrieks as he calls attention to the mirror image of the traumatized heart that compels him to act. They can hear his confession as a murderer, of course, but not the sexual subtext of the crime. Unheard by these "villains" who make disclosure of the horrors of sexual violation impossible, he begins to tell his tale yet again, this time to a listener he is hoping will understand its nonlinear coherence. This repetitive need to confess, it would seem, will continue until the narrator finds someone who can approach his story through a "new mode of reading and listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" (Caruth 9).

Like law enforcement and medical professionals who have too often failed to protect male victims of incest, perhaps we literary critics have too often failed to recognize male victimization as a literal, albeit coded, reality in the fiction we read. Just as critic Maurice Hindle reminds us that, in a gothic novel such as William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, "certain 'Gothic' features [...] actually coincide with historical incidents or conditions of the period in which Godwin lived and with which he was in touch," we must remember that incest, though long identified as a staple of gothic literature, operates not just as a symbol of social defiance in such literature, as Masao Miyoshi (3) and so many

others have argued, but also as a literal referent, and in this tale, as the referent of displaced, symbolically coded exploration (qtd. in Hindle xxiii, emph. Godwin's).

As professional readers of texts, we believe that the stakes of how we read are high, for many, many reasons. When texts that struggle to articulate the taboo are involved, those stakes may be especially high. Speaking to fellow mental health professionals, psychiatrist Herschel Rosenzweig writes words also important for literary scholars to consider: "Professionals must overcome their own sense of horror [...] and denial [...] and consider the possibilities which have been unthinkable to [help stop] persistent, displaced, destructive sexual activity" (61). Unless we read sexual subtexts with care, the sensationalism and displacement of gothic modes of violence and rebellion can actually work to keep hidden the very real abuses of power that generate them. The power of text in uncovering larger, hidden social dynamics must not be underestimated.

Rosenzweig's description of how incest survivors finally manage to give voice to what is directly incommunicable chillingly recalls the title of Poe's tale: "Many children will come in and say, 'I can't talk. I can't tell you what is happening.' And when encouraged to write, they will say, 'Okay, but don't look.' And then you turn your back and they will write the tell-tale note." Writing such a "tell-tale" note, according to Rosenzweig, "is a useful way of helping children to free themselves from their enormous anxiety and inhibition" (57). The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" has tried to write, as best he can, such a note for us. But until we can read it, he, and those like him, remain the victims of "perceived negative attitudes toward male victims of sexual violence [that] are critical barriers to the male who needs to talk about what has happened" in order to heal (Turner 105).

NOTES

1/ Karen Sanchez-Eppler offers a fascinating argument about how a father's homoerotic desire for his infant son operates in nineteenth-century temperance stories, but argues that, in these tales, "homosexuality functions predominantly as an index of feminization, not as a sign of distinct sexual desires." See "Incest and Social Order in Nineteenth-Century America," *Incest and the Literary Imagination* (Ed. Elizabeth Barnes. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002) 177.

2/ It is also noteworthy that in Otto Rank's wide-ranging psychoanalytical examination of classical myths, he links the theme of dismemberment with the theme of castration. See Gregory C. Richter's translation of *Das Inzest-Motiv in Dichtung und Sage, The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) 248-56.

3/ See *The Divided Self* (New York: New York UP, 1969).

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