

A Comparative Study on Intertextuality of *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Yellow Wallpaper**

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Intertextuality theory is one of extremely important critical methods in a host of western literary theories and provides a new perspective for numerous research scholars and common readers to comprehend and elaborate literature and literary works. This thesis uses multiple and comprehensive ways mainly based on the theory of intertextuality. Theory of symbolism and the method of close reading are also used to explore the internal connection of two short stories: *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The author attempts to build blocks to application practice of the intertextuality theory in specific works, and elaborate the value and significance of intertextuality comprehension from two aspects including literary reading and literary inheritance.

Keywords: intertextuality, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Edgar Allan Poe

The Introduction of Edgar Allan Poe and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

It is universally acknowledged that Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) are well-known novelists in the 19th century both of whom play an indispensable role in American literature.

Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer, poet, editor, and literary critic. Poe is best known for his poetry and short stories, particularly his tales of mystery and the macabre. He is widely regarded as a central figure of Romanticism in the United States and of American literature as a whole, and he was one of the country's earliest practitioners of the short story. He is also generally considered the inventor of the detective fiction genre and is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. Poe was the first well-known American writer to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career. Charlotte Perkins Gilman also known as Charlotte Perkins Stetson, her first married name, was a prominent American humanist, novelist, writer of short stories, poetry and nonfiction, and a lecturer for social reform. She was a utopian feminist and served as a role model for future generations of feminists because of her unorthodox concepts and lifestyle. She has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. Her best

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remembered work today is her semi-autobiographical short story “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”, which she wrote after a severe bout of postpartum psychosis.

Intertextuality Theory

Intertextuality is a term derived from Latin word *interexto*, a kind of textual theory which plays quite an important part in history of western literary theories in the 20th century. The narratologist Gerald Prince has a clearer definition of intertextuality in his *Dictionary of Narratives*: “The relationship between a certain text and other texts it references, rewrites, absorbs, expands, or transforms in general, and it is possible to understand the text based on this relationship” (Prince, 2001, p. 243). Besides, the construction of intertextuality is equipped with three elements, text A, text B and the intertextual relationship R between A and B which apparently means that intertextuality has relationship with “texts” (Li, 2014). The author will apply intertextuality theory to analyze two short stories in the next part.

Intertextuality in Plots

The Tell-Tale Heart and *The Yellow Wallpaper* exist several similarities in terms of plots of the text. *The Tell-Tale Heart* is a first-person narrative told by an unnamed narrator. Insisting that they are sane, the narrator suffers from a disease (nervousness) which causes “over-acuteness of the senses”. The old man with whom the narrator lives has a clouded, pale, blue “vulture-like” eye, which distresses and manipulates the narrator so much that the narrator plots to murder the old man, despite also insisting that the narrator loves the old man. The narrator is insistent that this careful precision in committing the murder proves that they cannot possibly be insane. For seven nights, the narrator opens the door of the old man’s room to shine a sliver of light onto the “evil eye.” However, the old man’s vulture-eye is always closed, making it impossible to “do the work,” thus making the narrator go further into distress. On the eighth night, the old man awakens after the narrator’s hand slips and makes a noise, interrupting the narrator’s nightly ritual. The narrator does not draw back and, after some time, decides to open the lantern. A single thin ray of light shines out and lands precisely on the “evil eye,” revealing that it is wide open. The narrator hears the old man’s heart beating, which only gets louder and louder. This increases the narrator’s anxiety to the point where the narrator decides to strike. He jumps into the room and the old man shrieks once before he is killed. The narrator then dismembers the body and conceals the pieces under the floorboards and ensures the concealment of all signs of the crime. Even so, the old man’s scream during the night causes a neighbor to report to the police, who the narrator invites in to look around. The narrator claims that the scream heard was the narrator’s own in a nightmare and that the old man is absent in the country. Confident that they will not find any evidence of the murder, the narrator brings chairs for them and they sit in the old man’s room. The chairs are placed on the very spot where the body is concealed; the police suspect nothing, and the narrator has a pleasant and easy manner.

Narrated also in the first person, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a collection of journal entries written by a unnamed woman whose physician husband John has rented an old mansion for the summer. Forgoing other rooms in the house, the couple moves into the upstairs nursery. As a form of treatment, the woman is forbidden from working or writing, and is encouraged to eat well and get plenty of air, so she can recuperate from what he calls a “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency”, a diagnosis common to women during that

period. The narrator devotes many journal entries to describing the wallpaper in the room—its “sickly” color, its “yellow” smell, its bizarre and disturbing pattern like “an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions”, its missing patches, and the way it leaves yellow smears on the skin and clothing of anyone who touches it. She describes how the longer one stays in the bedroom, the more the wallpaper appears to mutate, especially in the moonlight. With no stimulus other than the wallpaper, the pattern and designs become increasingly intriguing to the narrator. She soon begins to see a figure in the design and eventually comes to believe that a woman is creeping on all fours behind the pattern. Believing she must free the woman in the wallpaper, the woman begins to strip the remaining paper off the wall.

These two short stories all portray the narrator’s insanity as a way to protest the “thing ” that disgusts them from inner feelings to external expressions. Therefore, the two short stories have similarities in plots.

Intertextuality in Writing Techniques

The two short stories demonstrate two writing techniques: flashback and symbolism.

Flashback disarranges the sequence of events and makes people enter the critical juncture of the story development unexpectedly, thus creating strong suspense for readers and making the story more thrilling and exciting. Both Edgar Allan Poe and Charlotte Perkins Gilman applied flashback in the two short stories. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator depicts his evil conducts to the old man during the whole week before the murder.

...I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before killed him. 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 then 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. 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...

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator depicts a conflict between the couple that sets the stage for the following plots.

...That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid; but I don’t care there is something strange about the house—I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a draught, and shut the window. I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition. But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself, —before him, at least, —and that makes me very tired...

Flashback in the two short stories can enhance the vividness and make the article produce more suspense and become more attractive. At the same time, it can also avoid the flat narrative and monotonous structure so as to get readers interested in reading.

Symbol is not only an artistic technique, but also a kind of way to express abstract emotion of modern people, so as to reveal people’s inner world and spiritual and emotional state. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Edgar Allan Poe depicts the symbol of the old man’s eyes:

I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! 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....

...When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. 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, for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

From these paragraphs, the motive of the “murder” proves the eye of the old man. “Eyes” are always the symbol of rationality, especially the eyes of the old man, which are compared to the sharp eyes of the vulture as if they can see into the hearts of others. Therefore, the moral depravity of the “murder” can be seen at a glance. The vulture refers to a scavenger who devours carrion. Therefore, the eyes tell the story of death, and also symbolize the majesty of the old man. The narrator feels uncomfortable and disgusted with eye because he thinks it has mysterious powers that can see into his soul and sin.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman also uses “eye” as one of textual symbols.

I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside-down, and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

The “eye” refers to the eyes of these women who hide behind the wallpaper. The narrator is in a bound life circumstance. While under the impression that husbands and male doctors were acting with their best interests in mind, women were depicted as mentally weak and fragile. Women's rights advocates of the era believed that the “outbreak” of this mental instability was the manifestation of their setbacks regarding the roles they were allowed to play in a male-dominated society. Women were even discouraged from writing, because it would ultimately create an identity and become a form of defiance.

Intertextuality in Characters

The two main characters are described as insanity and abnormal person respectively. At the same time, both of them are unnamed. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Poe introduces the character of the “narrator” at the beginning of the short story:

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 in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.”

From the above statement, it is also possible that the narrator has paranoid schizophrenia. Paranoid schizophrenics prove very often experience auditory hallucinations. These auditory hallucinations are more

often voices, but can also be sounds. The hallucinations do not need to derive from a specific source other than one's own head, which is another indication that the narrator is suffering from such a psychological disorder. This is of course a very modern view of the work; in Poe's era there was no such diagnosis, and Poe would not have been familiar with a set of symptoms as pertaining to any definite mental disease.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*,

...If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again...

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself, —before him, at least, and that make some very tired.

The narrator is described as an unnamed woman, a young wife and new mother whose debilitating mental condition has prevented her from caring for her infant. And his husband did not permit her to write even he had a charwoman keep an eye on her. The narrator became insane gradually on account of mental bondage.

Conclusion

With the analysis of intertextuality theory, the relationship of *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* is obvious. This thesis applies intertextuality theory to explore the connection and the mutual relation of *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. From the previous research on plots, writing techniques and characters, we can arrive at a conclusion that intertextuality exist between the two short stories.

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