

# Defamiliarization: A Formalism Study on How Words Can Create Compelling Narrative in Edgar Allan Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart

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## Defamiliarization: A Formalism Study on How Words Can Create Compelling Narrative in Edgar Allan Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart

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### ABSTRACT

Literary works are frequently used to express human expression through words, making literary works one of the unique mediums to express these expressions. The uniqueness lies within the language used to construct the story itself. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the factors that make a literary work great through formalism and defamiliarization theory, furthermore uncovering the impact of the factors on the story. Using a qualitative research method specifically close reading, this study describes how the strength of a short story The Tell-Tale Heart written by Edgar Allan Poe according to both formalism and defamiliarization theory can contribute to the construction of the story. The construction of the story relies on its tension which is delivered through the use of its imageries, form/structure, parallelism, etc. It can be concluded that the possession of the formalism elements helps the story to shape its nuance and its atmospheric storytelling.

### Introduction

As social being, human is incapable to live by their own; they need others to establish life, and therefore human-to-human communication is needed. They communicate to deliver feelings, ideas, or desire to others (Sesanti et al., 2021). Human communication can be categorized into two categories in which are verbal and non verbal. Verbal communication deals with utterance that is spoken by individual, meanwhile non-verbal is the opposite of the verbal in which includes gestures, and written language.

Literature is a form of non-verbal communication device and is widely known as a medium of expressing people's feelings. This medium usually uses language as its power and is delivered in form of a poem, stories, etc. Damono (2020) states that literature is a social organization that uses language as its medium. In addition, he also states that literary works do not merely fall from the skies, but are created by writers and are meant to be enjoyed,

felt, understood, and used by society. Similarly, Sumarni (2014) states “when we are talking about literary works, it is clear in our mind that literary works are meant to convey messages by using language, literature is an art which<sup>16</sup> relation with the emotional aspect of human”. Eka Serli Sudarni (2017) mentioned that literature reflects the various experiences, ideas, passions of human beings in their daily life that express in several styles of literary works.

Literature can take in many form, for instance literature can be a poetry. Poetry is a meticulous form of literature, which consists lines, stanzas, rhyme and contains metaphor (Piscayanti, 2021).

The object that is analyzed in this study is a fictional short story. In particular, a short story was written by Edgar Allan Poe. In his career, he had written many stories one of which is a short horror story called *The Tell-Tale Heart*. This story provides an unsettling relationship between a son and a father, which is ended with the son killing his father. Not only that the story is disturbing enough for readers, but also the nuance of the story itself is well-crafted. Though it is only four pages long, the horror of the atmosphere of the house concisely terrifying. The deliverance of this atmosphere becomes the utmost reason why this story is chosen to be analyzed.

Formalism theory, pioneered by Roman Jakobson (Bennet, 2003), is encouraged in this study as the primary tool to analyzed the object. This theory focuses on the literary text itself; excluding external factors upon the literary works were written. Another formalism-based theory is used to analyze the object; a theory called defamiliarization. Elizabeth R. Romanow (2013) also states that according to Victor Shklovsky, the pioneer of defamiliarization defined defamiliarization as a way or a process that purposes to make the familiar and every day into the strange/unfamiliar object which works as art and make the renewal of perception, make the reader see the world in a new light and in an unforeseen way. Those theories will be used to answer these two questions: How can the factors construct compelling storytelling in *The Tell-Tale Heart*?

### Literature review

To accomplish the goal of this research, the researcher uses literary theory as the tool to uncover the strength of *The Tale-Tell Heart*. Using formalism theory in which is invented by Roman Jakobson in 1915 (Bennet, 2003). This formalism theory focuses on the internal factor of literary works, excluding external factors such as biographical and historical factors. The formalist approach believes that literary works can be analyzed scientifically through their formal devices or their intrinsic element (Malik, 2019). Guerin (2005) states that this approach is not merely focusing on the meaning of the words within the work, but also some other factors are needed to support the argument or the idea to understand the work. Another formalist-based theory used in this research is defamiliarization, which is essentially a branch of formalism itself.

The following are formalism and defamiliarization terms used as the tool to analyze Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tale-Tell Heart*:

1. Form/structure. The way that the story is structured of form.
2. Texture. The embodiment of imagery and metaphors (Guerin, 2005; p. 105).

3. Imagery. Faculty for visualization (Childs & Fowler, 2006).
4. Point of view. The perspective of narration.
5. Tension. tension is often in irony and paradox. (Guerin, 2005)
6. Defamiliarization in perception. an art skill in which making objects strange, difficult in form, and increase the feeling of difficulty and time length (Dai, 2020).
7. Metaphor. The use of language in which compares two or more things implicitly.
8. Simile. figurative speech that compares two dissimilar things using “as” or “like”.
9. Parallelism. The repetition of similar words, sentences, or phrases in a text.

Several studies regarding the use of formalism and defamiliarization have been conducted numerous times. Pourjafari (2012) finds that in Bijan Nadi’s fiction defamiliarization has been demonstrated through various literary techniques and poetic strategies to dissociate the reader’s habitual attitude towards the realities of life by defamiliarizing ideas and themes in his story. Malik (2019) uses a formalism approach in analyzing a famous rap song entitled *Rap God* by Eminem to find that whether it has a literary element or not, and finds that *Rap God* does possess some literary elements namely simile, metaphor, chiming, and rhythm. Zakiah & Premesti (2019) focuses on the use of defamiliarization towards the fictional character in *The Little Prince* by De Saint Exupery. Zakiah & Premesti find that through the characters’ strangeness the readers are forced to open their minds towards any possible assumption, interpretation, and meaning. Another formalism-based study was conducted by Saraswati (2019) aiming to uncover the type of characters and their characterization also to uncover the revelation of the poet’s character and their characterization in conveying human value. In her study she finds some of the characters are not described clearly, meanwhile, the categorization of the characters can be easily identified by the characters’ minds, actions, appearance, and speech

### Research Methods

The methodology of this research is qualitative design, specifically using close reading method to figure out the elements and further analyze them. Close reading is a reading method that uses personal engagement towards the text and critical thinking as its requirement (Valentine, 2016). Similarly, Duarte et al (2019) state that close reading is an analysis that focuses on the structures and the patterns which exist within a text. Therefore, this method is used as a tool to analyze the object of the study. The object is a short horror story written by Edgar Allan Poe entitled *The Tale-Tell Heart*. A relatively short story that focuses its idea on the disturbing relationship between a son and his father.

### Findings

The main objective of this study is to find how *The Tale-Tell Heart* is constructed from a formalism and defamiliarization perspective. Thus, describing the elements that are found after the analysis process and their impact on the construction of the story. In doing so, formalism theory is encouraged as an analysis tool that analyzes the intrinsic elements of a text. Formalism consists of several components that are used to narrow down the scope of

the analysis such as form/structure, point of view, imagery, and irony/paradox. Meanwhile, the defamiliarization component consists of parallelism, simile, and metaphor.

### **Form/structure**

A good impression is vital to every introduction in everything, this is also no exception in this story. Taking a closer look at the very first sentence of the story it is noticeable that it is written in the uppercase style. The uppercase style indicates that we need to pay attention more to what it is saying to the reader. "IT'S TRUE! YES, I HAVE BEEN ILL..." (P1L1) The line suggests that the illness takes a huge role in the story. Furthermore, the readers are introduced to the interrogative sentences. It gives the reader something to wonder; to question the nature of the story. Provoking the reader to question what is going on in the story, and what does the main character means by saying he lost control of his mind? Therefore, this making the readers crave the answer to these questions, making the readers invest more in the story; to unravel the mystery.

The story also introduces a plot twist. The twist that is introduced in *The Tell-Tale Heart* follows the principle of Chekov's gun. Chekov believes that every detail in the story is necessary to the plot, thus he wrote "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It is wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep" (Choy, 2017). In simple terms, the rifle is introduced at the beginning of the story and then is reintroduced again in the next act. The so-called "loaded rifle" in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is the following line: "Now I could hear a quick, low, soft sound of a click heard through a wall" (P11L2 – P11L3). The line serves as a notification to notify the readers that the old man is indeed alive—it is the old man's heartbeat. This line or "the loaded rifle" is fired at the end of the story. It is proven by reintroducing a similar line at the end. "It was a quick, low, soft sound, like the sound of a clock heard through a wall, a sound I knew well" (P16L3 – P16L5). The reintroduction shocks the main character and also shocks the readers. This reintroduction is effective because it is against the norm that have been introduced earlier. The readers were given the idea that the old man is dead, and then the line reintroduction gives a new idea that the old man's heart is still beating. It is shocking because according to the natural law that something is dead the capability to produce a life sign is considered unnatural. Furthermore, the readers' attention is diverted towards the tension and the action of the main character. Firstly, The writer describes the sound through the line above, but later the focus shifts from the sound to the main character's emotion by stating this line "And as the sound grew louder my anger become greater and more painful" (P11L5 – P11L6). Thus, the readers' expectations are focused on the climax action that is the killing. Thus, making the "low sound" obscured; making it easily missed by the readers.

### **Point of View**

The story is written in first-person perspective. Limiting the readers' view upon the story only to the main characters' perspective creates an illusion that the readers are not only experiencing the story from the main characters' perspective but also making the readers experience the story as if that they are the main character. This limitation also affects



the revelation of information that is given in the story. Writing on an omniscient perspective can easily reveal the puzzling information of the story into several pieces. For instance, if there are two conflicting characters in the story, using an omniscient perspective, the wittier can give more information regarding how each character will defeat another. Limitation in first-person perspective narrative revokes this ability. Therefore, making surprises or jump scare in horror story effective.

### **Parallelism**

One of the examples in parallelism is the word "louder" which is repeated numerous times throughout the story. The repetition of this particular word is written in such a way that it builds the tension effectively. In the first encounter, the word "louder" is written once in one sentence, and later increases into twice and thrice as the very peak of the tension. This is proven by the following line: "I talked still faster and louder. And the sound, too, become louder" (P16L3) the word "louder". In the next line, it is written twice: "Louder it became, and louder. Why did the men not go? Louder, louder" (P16L5 - P16L6). For the third encounter, the word is repeated thrice in a sentence: "I was more suffering more than I could bear, from their smiles, and from that sound. Louder, louder, louder" (P17L2 - P17L3). This construction conveys the increasing intensity of the sound tension.

### **Imagery**

There are four main imageries found in the story organic imagery focuses on what the characters feel, visual imagery determines what the readers "see" through the texts, kinesthetic implies what the characters do, and audio imagery implies the sound that is "heard" through texts. Organic imagery happens when the main character feels the love-hate feeling towards the old man; his feeling is unsure. The visual imagery is used to describe the eye of the old man by using the phrase "hard blue eye". Meanwhile, the kinesthetic imagery is done by showing what the characters are doing, for instance, the main character kills the old man by smothering him. On the other hand, the auditory imagery is found when the main character heard a sound which is described by the following line: "Then I heard a sound, a low cry of fear which escaped from the old man" (P9L2 - P9L3)

### **Simile**

The author uses a simile to compare two different things. For instance, the author describes the eye of the old man as the eye of a vulture that carries the symbol of predator and death. The other comparison occurs when the author describes what the main character feels. The following line can be found in the story: "...and the blood in my body become like ice" (P10L5). This comparison gives the readers what it's like to be afraid of the old man's vulture eye.

### **Irony/Paradox**

The first paradox happens in the very first paragraph of the story. It is said that the main character is ill and normally illness makes one feel weak and helpless. Contrary, the main character feels that the illness only makes him stronger, strengthening his senses. The second instance is that the feeling of the main character towards the old man, the main character is unsure whether he loves or hates the old man. This love-hate feeling happens because he loves the old man but not the eye. These are paradoxical because those are contradictive logics and thus making these instances ironic for the main character.

### **Metaphor**

There is only one metaphor said in the story that is the moment when the main character reveals himself to the old man as the villain of the story; the moment when the main character is about to kill the old man. At this moment, it is found a phrase which says “*death was standing there*” (P9L6). This phrase is a direct statement that the main character has become consumed by his anger and fears, thus compares himself to death itself.

### **Discussion**

According to Gaith (in Setyorini & Fani Prastikawati, 2012) writing is a complex process that allows writers to explore thoughts and ideas, and make them visible and concrete, it encourages thinking and learning for it motivates communication and makes thought available for reflection. This exploration is also needed in writing a story whether it is short or long, such as novel. Furthermore, intrinsic elements are necessary as the essential and natural part of the story itself. Therefore, the writers of a story instinctively use intrinsic elements in their story whether it is consciously or unconsciously.

The finding of this research states that every intrinsic element has the role to make a story become something that is worth reading. The form/or the structure of *The Tale-Tell Heart* is written in such a way to help the readers get the best experience of the story. This is supported by Irshad & Ahmed (2015) that the structure of a story helps to understand the writers' intension. Another way of understanding a story is through imageries as Kurniawan (2010) mentions that imagery evokes human experiences both in abstract and tangible forms. Thus, imageries help to set up the nuance or the atmosphere of a story. The perspective in narration helps the reader to immerse themselves deeper towards the story. *The Tale-Tell Heart* is written in monologue style which uses first-person perspective, this perspective makes the readers as if they are the main character in the story. Sisakht (2014) supports this statement by arguing that “*In the first-person narrations, narrator is either the witness of happening or involves in the story*”. Poe also uses defamiliarization which includes parallelism, metaphor, simile, and irony/paradox as the elements that are introduced his work *The Tale-Tell Heart*. This defamiliarization contributes as the tool to grab the readers' attention and to open a new way to interpret his story. This is supported in Pourjafari's (2012) research that says defamiliarization is demonstrated in Najdi's story to challenge the reader's thought which resulting infinite possibilities of interpretations.

### **Conclusion**

This research concludes that in good story writing there are abundance of literary elements that make a story is well written intrinsically. The intrinsic elements helps to construct a story that is worth reading and thus giving an immersive experience for the readers.

However, to achieve a full understanding on constructing a well written story, it can not be achieved by analyzing a story from one perspective only. Similar studies using different approaches are required, therefore, hopefully, this study could inspire other researchers to further investigating the importance of literary element both intrinsically and externally on the construction of a story.

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