Project Narrative 10.26.2023 MASTER\_mixdown

[00:00:00] **Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I will be talking with Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen, who has selected Edgar Allan Poe's The Tell Tale Heart.

[00:00:30] Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen is Professor of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University in Denmark. I first became aware of Henrik's ability to think in new and fresh ways about narrative and narrative theory in 2003 when he submitted to Narrative the essay that became The Impersonal Voice in First Person Narrative Fiction.

[00:00:53] Since that time, Henrik has published widely in both Danish and English and has made his mark in numerous subfields of [00:01:00] narrative theory. including unnatural narrative and unnatural narratology, rhetorical narratology, and fictionality studies. Henrik's most recent works in English are the co edited collections Fictionality and Literature, Core Concepts Revisited, two thousand, uh, 2022, and Dangers of Fictionality and Narrative, a rhetorical approach to storytelling in contemporary Western culture, uh, coming, uh, later this year.

[00:01:33] Henrik is currently working on several projects, including a study of the interrelations of fictionality and sexuality. Uh, Henrik, is there anything you'd like to tell our listeners before you read, uh, Pose the Tell Tale Heart?

[00:01:48] **Henrik Nielson:** Yes, Jim. Thank you so much for for the welcome and thanks for inviting me to the podcast.

[00:01:52] It's uh, it's amazing to to follow in the in the long line of very distinguished narrative scholars. So, so thank you so much for including me here. And [00:02:00] and also I'd like to extend that thank you for to you to for everything you've done to our scholarly community and for so many. Persons and academics who have really moved the fields of narrative theory and literary studies in tremendous ways.

[00:02:11] So, so thanks for that.

[00:02:12] **Jim Phelan:** Thank you. Well, let's get to the story. Let's get to the story. Right, right,

[00:02:17] **Henrik Nielson:** right. And a little bit of context. Uh, so, so two things, uh, I want to mention as a context. So, so one, one thing is, uh, that this story, that Telltale Heart is published. First time in 1843, uh, in the first, the very first edition of the Journal of the Pioneer, uh, and I'll be reading from, uh, this, uh, first edition because the story is somewhat, uh, changed in the later editions following Griswold's, uh, kind of infamous revisions of, of Poe's, uh, Ra after, after post, uh, death.

[00:02:47] Um, uh, and, uh, and it has a very close connection with telltale heart to two to two other short stories by po uh, the Black Cat, uh, which he talked to Faye Ban about in episode [00:03:00] 17 and the end of the purpose, um, in the sense that in each of these, uh, three stories, in each instance, a murder is committed by what seems like a, a maniac.

[00:03:09] And we, we can interpret. In, in what sense that, that word would apply and in all three texts, uh, that, uh, murderer is completely safe and has concealed the murder, uh, very well, so there's no chance that he will be accused of murder, let alone convicted. Unless he himself confesses to the crimes kind of against his own will, and then this is exactly what happens.

[00:03:31] So, so already that kind of connection between the text leads us to questions not only concerning the murder in itself, but also what does it mean to have an intention and a will and to do something against your own will. So, so that's one thing maybe to, to, to, to listen for and more specifically, uh, to listen.

[00:03:50] I would invite listeners who want to do so to, uh, kind of, uh, take notice of how much effort is put into by [00:04:00] Poe and the character narrator. Uh, to make sure that, that, that we, uh, understand that, uh, the character narrator has nothing against the old man, uh, whom he confesses to, to murdering, uh, how, how many times that is repeated and how it is repeated, uh, again and again, how instead what vexes him is, uh, the old man's eye, his evil eye, the evil eye, uh, uh, and also, uh, as a final thing, uh, maybe, uh, if, if listeners want to, they can pay attention to, old Thank you.

[00:04:29] The rhythm, uh, created by the repetitions, uh, in the text, especially, uh, towards the end.

[00:04:35] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. All right. That's great. So, thank you. Um, now here's Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen reading Edgar Allan Poe's The Telltale Heart.

[00:04:48] **Henrik Nielson:** Thank you very much. The Telltale Heart, and in this edition, it is, uh, accompanied by a short epigraph by Longfellow.

[00:04:54] Which goes like this, art is long and time is fleeting, and our [00:05:00] hearts though stout and brave, still like muffled drums are beating funeral marches to the grave and then follows post sale. True nervous. Very, very dreadfully nervous. I had been and am, but why will you say that? I'm mad. The deceased had sharpened my senses.

[00:05:18] Not destroyed, not told 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? I can, and observe, how helpfully, how calmly, I can tell you the whole story. It's impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night.

[00:05:43] 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. He had the eye of a vulture, a pale blue eye with a [00:06:00] 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.

[00:06:13] Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Mad men know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded. With what caution, with what foresight, with what dissimilation, I went to work. I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it, oh, so gently.

[00:06:38] And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I first 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.

[00:06:59] It [00:07:00] took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening, so far that I could see the old man as he lay upon his bed. Would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously, oh so cautiously, for the hinges creaked. I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye.

[00:07:22] And this I did for seven long nights, every night, just at midnight. But I found the eye always closed, and so it was impossible to do the work. For it was not the old man who vexed me, but his evil eye. And every morning... When the day broke, I went boldly into his chamber and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone and inquiring how he had passed the night.

[00:07:45] So, you see, he would have been a very profound old man indeed to suspect that every night just at twelve I looked in upon him while he slept. Upon the eighth night, I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. I watched as Minit's [00:08:00] hand moved more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers, of my sagacity.

[00:08:07] I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door little by little, and the old man not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea, and perhaps the old man heard me, for he moved in the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back, but no, his room was as black as pitch with a thick darkness, for the shutters were close fastened through fear of robbers, and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept on pushing it steadily, steadily.

[00:08:43] I had got my head in and was about to open the lantern when my thumb slipped upon tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed crying out, who's there? I kept quite still and said nothing. For another hour I did not move a muscle. And in the meantime I did not hear the old man lie down, he [00:09:00] was still sitting up in the bed listening, just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

[00:09:08] Recently I heard a slight groan and I knew that it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief, oh, no. It was a 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 swelled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me.

[00:09:33] 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.

[00:09:51] He had been saying to himself, it's nothing but the wind in the chimney, it's only a mouse crossing the floor. Or, it is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp. [00:10:00] Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions. But he had found all in vain. All in vain! Because death, in approaching the old man, had stopped with his black shadow before him.

[00:10:13] And the shadow had now reached and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel, although he neither saw nor heard me, to feel the presence of my head within the room. When I had waited for a long time, very patiently, without hearing the old man lie down, I resolved to open a little, a very, very little crevice in the lantern.

[00:10:37] 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 fell 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 [00:11:00] veal over it that chilled the very marrow of my bones.

[00:11:04] 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 damn spot. And now, have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses? Now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound. Much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.

[00:11:28] I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates a soldier into courage. But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye.

[00:11:49] Meantime, the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme. It grew louder, I say, louder [00:12:00] every moment. Do mark me well. I have told you that I'm nervous, so I am. And now, at the dead hour of night, and amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable wrath.

[00:12:14] Yet, for some minutes longer, I refrained and kept still. But the beating grew louder. Louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now, a new anxiety seized me. The sound would be heard by a neighbor. The old man's hour had come. With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once, once only.

[00:12:35] In an instance, I dragged him to the floor and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then sat upon the bed and smiled gaily to find the deed so far done. But for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me. It would not be heard through the walls. At length, it ceased. The old man was dead.

[00:12:57] I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was [00:13:00] stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. The old man was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more. If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body.

[00:13:18] The night waned and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all, I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the legs. I then took out three planks from the flooring of the chamber and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the bores so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye, not even his, could have detected anything wrong.

[00:13:40] There was nothing to wash out. No stain of any kind. No blood spot, whatever. I had been too wary for that. A chop had caught it all. Ha ha! When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock, still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, [00:14:00] for what had I now to fear?

[00:14:02] There entered three men who introduced themselves with perfect suavity as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night. A suspicion of foul play had been aroused. Information had been lodged at the police office, and they, the officers, had been deputed to search the premises.

[00:14:20] I smiled, for what had I to fear? I bade the gentleman welcome. The freak, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search, search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasure, secure, undisturbed.

[00:14:39] In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, I placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath Swiss reposed the corpse of the victim. The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them.

[00:14:58] I was singularly [00:15:00] at ease. They sat. And while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things, but ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wisdom gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears, but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct. I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling, but it continued and gained definitiveness, until at length I found that the noise was not within my ears.

[00:15:27] No doubt I now grew very pale, but I talked more fluently and with a heightened voice, yet the sound increased. And what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound, much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath, and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently, but the noise steadily increased.

[00:15:49] I arose and argued about trifles in a high key and with violent gesticulations, but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with [00:16:00] heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men. But the noise steadily increased. Oh God, what could I do? I foamed.

[00:16:07] I raved, I swore. I swung upon the chair, upon which I had sat and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose all overall and continually increased. It grew louder, louder, louder. And still the men chatted pleasantly and smiled cars. Uh, was it palpable they heard not? Almighty God, no, no, they heard. They suspected, they knew.

[00:16:31] They were making a mockery of my horror. This I thought, and this I think. But anything better than this agony, anything was more tolerable than this derision. I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer. I felt that I must scream or die, and now, again, hack! Louder, louder, louder, louder! Villains, I shrieked.

[00:16:53] Dissemble no more, I admit the deed. Tear up the planks. Here, here, it is the beating of his [00:17:00] hideous heart.

[00:17:04] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, excellent. Alright, so, um, You know, as you said, this is a kind of a, you know, Poe tale that we've, has become familiar. He's, you know, when we think about Poe, we think about this This story and, you know, this kind of, um, unreliable narrator and the horror and, um, guilt and these kinds of things.

[00:17:30] Um, and here, as you were saying, you know, maybe a kind of, um, you know, inadvertent confession. Um, so maybe we could just begin by, um, You know, going through that kind of, um, typical, uh, understanding of the story and what it pulls up to,

[00:17:51] **Henrik Nielson:** so. Right. Right. Yeah, yeah. Like you say, I think this is the typical understanding, and also that it makes a lot of sense.

[00:17:57] It is a tale of horror and of [00:18:00] dismemberment and blood, even if it leaves no stain. Uh, but it's a gruesome story about a character narrator confessing. To, to, to murdering, uh, an old man and, and, and like you said, he, he seems, uh, in several respects, uh, unreliable and, and, and, and somewhat like a, like a madman, um, and also it, it, it seems to make sense that, that he's, he's mad in the sense that he, he doesn't even, Really know why, why he wants to get rid of the old man, but, but, but he has this very, very strong antipathy against him and, and then murders him and dismembers him and, and then, uh, of course, the question for the reader is the question already raised by the, by the title and, and the telltale heart, what, what role does, does the Play and is there a sound anywhere because the policemen seem very clear to not hear anything and not notice anything.

[00:18:57] Yeah. Um, so, so, so, so what are we, are we to [00:19:00] make of what we're told by, by, by the title is the heart really, uh, telling anything, giving anything away, uh, or, or, or, or, or, or not. And, and, and one, uh, quite possible, uh, and, and fairly, I think typical interpretation is that. That, that obviously if the old man is stone dead, his heart is not beating, but, but, but maybe he's, uh, the character narrator is feeling so much guilt and anxiety that his own heart is beating fast and, and, and so he perceives of his, his own heart.

[00:19:32] And this is why he can kind of hear it and perceive of it, whereas obviously someone external to him, like the policeman, cannot. So it's like an overflow of emotion for him, and that kind of leaves him guilt ridden as he is, allegedly, in this interpretation. To, to, to confess out of, out of pure, pure guilt and, and emotion.

[00:19:53] Right, right. And I think that's, that's definitely a level that's, that's definitely in the story. Yes.

[00:19:58] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, and I think, you know, [00:20:00] just maybe another layer of that, uh, which is, I think, also something that we want to develop a little bit more as we go, is the nature of the narration, right? So that one of the things that stands out is, that he's not, um, he's not defending himself, um, uh, for, you know, having committed this murder.

[00:20:22] What he seems to be concerned about is, you know, I'm not mad. Don't think I'm mad. I'm not a bad man, right? And look at all these things I've done. Um, and there's a sort of an odd relationship between his relationship to the potential accusation or the actual accusation that he's mad. Um, which he's very concerned with, as opposed to, you know, well, you committed a murder, which he's, you know, in a way, he's initially kind of boasting about how, how well he did it and so on, you know, so.

[00:20:54] Right.

[00:20:55] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah. Yeah. I think that, that is, that is a great point and, and, and, and an [00:21:00] important point, and also a point that, that might move us towards other, other possibilities. Yeah. Because like you began, uh, to introduce the story constructed in a peculiar way where we have a frame in, in the beginning.

[00:21:13] Which is a bit unspecified. We don't know if it is an interrogation room with police officers or something else. But, but if we think of it as him being , like indicted and, and questioned by, by police. Yeah. Like you say, then it's strange that, that he's not, he, he, he's neither saying, okay, I didn't commit the murder or saying, okay, so, so I confessed in this situation to to, to the murder.

[00:21:33] Instead, he's defending himself exactly like you say, against a, a different accusation. Right, right. An accusation of, of, of madness. Right. Uh, and he's doing that, uh, in his monologue. But, but, but, but. Including in the monologue, a kind of an imagined dialogue. Why will you say that I'm mad? He's imagining someone, uh, accusing him of madness.

[00:21:54] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And then, I mean, one thing then we think about the progression, like, towards the end, [00:22:00] Um, it's almost like he's lost it all, right? He's not, he's, he's sort of immersed himself back into the... Uh, the moment of, um, you know, the hearing the heart again, right? And, and that's Mm-Hmm, that's, and that's sort of what takes over the narration, right?

[00:22:17] Right. He's no longer def defending, um, he's kind of reliving as he retells. And here's another way in which we could maybe come back to the idea of the, the title and the, the heart and the. Or the, you know, the tale that the heart is telling, right? It's right. It's as he, he, as he hears the beating of the heart, he's, you know, that becomes the climax of his tale, his, his, his hearing.

[00:22:49] And so it does become, you know, the, the title of it seems to be very APTT in that way. Um,

[00:22:56] **Henrik Nielson:** yeah. Yeah, exactly. Like, like, like you say, um, [00:23:00] and, and, and, uh, the, the, the time of the telling and the time of the toll are kind of mixed together in, in a way that they become almost indistinguishable towards the end.

[00:23:08] Is this what he's feeling now or what he felt then or both? He says towards the end, this I thought and this I think. And then he switches to the preterite tense, so like you say, he seems to be either reliving it or immersing himself, and maybe the readers as well, into that situation.

[00:23:25] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, no, that's good.

[00:23:28] Alright, so we have, you know, so this is a good way to start, I think, and we have, you know, we could sort of... Let me go further with, you know, some of these points that sort of flesh out this kind of typical reading. Um, but I know you're, you're interested in, um, other readings too, right? Are there other ways of, um, sort of configuring some of the, the details of the story?

[00:23:55] So you want to maybe start, start down that road?

[00:23:59] **Henrik Nielson:** [00:24:00] Right. Yes. Yes. So I'm not saying that this is not the true reading and I'm going to present a reading, but I'm just trying to suggest that that some things remain quite, quite indeterminate and, and, and, and I think, uh, at least another possible reading, uh, um, cast into doubt whether or not the old man even exist and, and especially whether or not a murder is, is even committed and, and I can, I can start that line of reasoning by, by referring to Thank you.

[00:24:29] Uh, the many, many instances, uh, which I also pointed to in the beginning, where he kind of tries to make very sure that the reader understands that it's not about the old man. It's about, as he says, I wanted to rid myself of the I forever. Yeah. And, and rid myself of the evil I. Yeah, he even says,

[00:24:46] **Jim Phelan:** he even says, I love the old man, right?

[00:24:49] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Um, so, so, so, and, and when you hear a sentence like the, his evil I or the evil I. It seems to include the possibility that it's [00:25:00] not only about a visual organ for seeing, but also about an evil part of oneself, an evil kind of subjectivity. And if that was the case, it would entail Poe playing around with homonyms in the text.

[00:25:15] Now, homonyms are words which sound the same. But, but mean different things, so for instance, the word two is a homonym because it means the number between one and three, and it also means also, so we can, we can say two, and then it can mean two different things. It also means that homonyms are words where hearing tells you one thing, but seeing them tells you another thing.

[00:25:41] And it seems to me that it's at least a possibility, uh, included in Poe's use of eye and of evil eye, that he wants listeners and readers to understand that it's both about a visual organ, but it's also about the eye himself. And then if we think that... [00:26:00] The story is also about wanting to rid yourself of some kind of subjectivity or self control.

[00:26:07] It turns out, I think, fairly quickly that it's actually fairly difficult to distinguish between the I and the old man. Um, because they seem to share almost every, uh, quality and every description. Uh, what the old man is thinking, uh, says the character narrator, is what I am thinking myself at night. Uh, the terror he feels is the terrors, uh, are the terrors I feel.

[00:26:33] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, in that regard, I mean, I think one of the things that stands out is that all the, uh, the attribution of thoughts that he gives to the old man on the eighth night, right, that he's trying to reassure himself, uh, et cetera, et cetera, it's, and I, you know, I mean, I think it's, uh, as a, you know, talk about my own The relationship to him is like, well, you don't know that.

[00:26:57] How do you know that? You know, this kind of thing is [00:27:00] very, but he's so convinced that he, that he, he can accurately report what's going on in the old man's head. So yeah.

[00:27:08] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah. Yeah. So, so, so if we say that, that at least one possible explanation of that is that. That these are actually his own thoughts we see in, uh, attributes to the old man, then we also see that that actually mirrors even a very realistic and naturalistic explanation about his heart.

[00:27:26] Because if we say in a very naturalistic reading of the text that, oh, but obviously it's not about the old man's heart, it's about him confusing. His own heart's beating for the old man's, then that's actually the same figure that, that he kind of redoubles what he feels himself and, and, and attributes it to, to, to the, to the old man.

[00:27:47] Right. And, and it seems very possible that that happens again and again. Also, the text makes it very clear that he jumps into the room with a loud yell. And then he says that about the old man. He freaks out. Right. And so, [00:28:00] so, so we have very definitively two, two loud yells, but then when the policemen come, they say that one freak had been reported.

[00:28:08] So, so again, that could be explained if, if, if he continuously kind of redoubles what, what comes from himself. Right,

[00:28:14] **Jim Phelan:** right, right. And I think another thing, you know, it just, it's kind of an interesting detail of the story in terms of, like, sustaining this reading of, uh, you know, the I being the character narrator, or, you know, it's his own relationship to himself that's at issue, um, like, this is, would also go along with, The idea that we don't know the occasion of the telling, like, right, if we were to definitively, you know, indicate that, okay, the character narrator is being interrogated by police after they found the body, then, you know, this, this reading is sort of blocked in a way that, that it's not [00:29:00] when we, when, when Poe leaves that, um, indeterminate, as you say.

[00:29:05] **Henrik Nielson:** Right. Right. And actually what you said just before yourself that he's, he's, uh, explicitly defending himself against accusation of madness and not against excessive murder, right? Would seem to, to, to, to suggest that it's even more plausible that, that he's maybe in an asylum or something being questioned than he is in a, in a police office in, in an interrogation.

[00:29:28] Yeah. And again, in a very, uh, actually, in a sense, down to earth fashion, it would make a lot of sense if we say, okay, so, so there was never an old man, uh, uh, present, but, but the policemen, uh, arrived to the place because of the yelling and then, and then with no one else present, he begins raving about and talking about dismemberments and corpses.

[00:29:52] And at least I have the strong feeling that when they tear up the planks as he invites them to, they're going to find nothing. [00:30:00] And if that would be the case, then it would be very possible that they would say to him, well, you're mad. There, there's no court and, and, and, and, and I think all also other details, uh, kind of point us a little bit in, in that direction.

[00:30:17] Uh, for example, the, the method of the murder, which seems to me extremely vague. Yeah. Because he says, so, so, so I threw him under the bed. Right. And then I sat upon the bed. Right. Right. That first time I've ever heard of that kind of murder ,

[00:30:33] **Jim Phelan:** right? It's, it's not gonna be in the, the Manual for Murder for Dummies, or how to, how to commit a murder.

[00:30:38] Right. Put a bet on top of somebody and sit on it. Right? No, no, that's for, for a while. Yeah. Yeah,

[00:30:43] **Henrik Nielson:** yeah, yeah. And, and, and, and also, I, I, I mean, I know that, that he says that he caught all of the blood in, in a tub, so that's kind of an explanation. Yeah. But, but, so it seems that, that as soon as, as the alleged murder is allegedly committed.

[00:30:57] The old man kind of evaporates completely out of the text [00:31:00] Uh, so he doesn't even leave a stain or anything, uh, Yeah, yeah, right, right. So, so, so, so, so, I think a lot of details, uh, cast doubt upon whether or not that murder

[00:31:12] **Jim Phelan:** actually happened. Right, and just to go again with the idea of, of them, um, you know, the police, well, how are they going to react, right, to the, the final lines there, right, he, he yells at them, villains!

[00:31:25] Right? Dissemble no more. Um, like somehow they're doing something, you know, and if, so if, if you're on the receiving end of this accusation as a policeman, you're going to say, where does this come from? Right? This guy must be, you know, sort of losing it. Um, yeah, yeah,

[00:31:47] **Henrik Nielson:** yeah. So, yeah, so, so, so in that sense, I think we've already kind of arrived at a point where.

[00:31:52] Like at a, at a very first point, it, it might seem like far-fetched and, and, and, and, and, and like a stretch of the, I imagin say, okay, but the old man [00:32:00] doesn't even exist. But, but in a sense, it's, it's a very down to earth explanation that, that he, he's talking about madness. He's talking about being deceived, being hypersensitive, being deceived by his senses.

[00:32:10] And, and, and if you arrived, like you say as a police in that situation and meeting those kind of accusations, allegations. It would be perfectly possible that the story would kind of play out, play out in this

[00:32:21] **Jim Phelan:** way. Yeah, right, right, right, yeah, okay, all right, good. So again, I mean, I think you're suggesting like this is a possible reading, but you're not sort of saying, well, this is definitely better than the other one.

[00:32:34] Right. The more standard one, right, yeah, okay. Um, so I don't know, you know, from our previous talk too, that you wanted to talk a little bit about Poe and Descartes and, um, body mind kinds of things, um, sort of an implicit dialogue you see between, uh, Descartes meditations and Poe's story. Right.

[00:32:57] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah. Right, yes, [00:33:00] I would like that, um, especially because, I mean, sometimes, uh, when we read literature and, or talk about narratives.

[00:33:09] We might characterize someone as a Cartesian subject, and oftentimes when we say that, we just mean that it's a self reflecting consciousness. But I think in the Telltale Heart, the closeness to Descartes First and Second Meditation on First Philosophy Uh, goes way beyond that kind of, uh, uh, partition, uh, subject in general.

[00:33:32] That, that actually the first lines in, uh, in, uh, post Cell Tale heart completely emulates, uh, the first lines in the, in kars, uh, meditations. Uh, and, and I, if you'll allow me, I'll just read out six, eight lines from Descartes, um, and, and, and also, uh, of course, we can remember that, that what, what Descartes meditation is all about is what can be cast into doubt, and especially how, how can senses deceive me.

[00:33:58] So, so that's kind of [00:34:00] Descartes starting point, point of departure for, for what, what can be cast into doubt. And Descartes says, quote, Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true, I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time, I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.

[00:34:20] How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine, unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen? But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself. A brilliant piece of reasoning, as if I were not a man who sleeps at night and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake.

[00:34:42] Indeed, sometimes even more improbable ones. How often asleep at night am I convinced of just such familiar events? That I'm here in my dressing gown, sitting by the fire, when in fact I'm lying in bed. Yet at this moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper. I shake my head, [00:35:00] and it is not asleep.

[00:35:01] As I stretch out and feel my hand, I do so deliberately, and I know what I'm doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep, end quote. Um, and, and I think, uh, at least for me, it was, it was, uh, funny, but also fruitful to see that there seems to me to be a two way, uh, traffic between post text and, and, and, and the cards.

[00:35:32] Um, they are both monologues, but they also, uh, both include in those monologues, dialogues, including

[00:35:42] dialogicity. And I think what, what, what co adds to my understanding of the context are two things. So first of all, it, it, it shows me for the first time how Descartes text is actually really funny. And it also, it also shows me how Descartes splits himself into two [00:36:00] Descartes. Like there's the rational Descartes who says, Oh, but I, I, I am certainly aware that now I'm awake.

[00:36:05] And then there's the ironical. Undercutting Descartes, the cynical Descartes, who says, Ha, indeed, as if, as if you don't remember other cases where you have been tricked by exactly the same thing. So it's a dialogue between a rational Descartes and a skeptical,

[00:36:18] **Jim Phelan:** uh, Descartes. Yeah,

[00:36:19] **Henrik Nielson:** very much. So I think that, that's one thing that Poe kind of adds to, to my understanding of Descartes.

[00:36:24] And then he adds a kind of madness to Descartes text. And also Descartes... They actually explicitly compare themselves to madmen. And then it's this very funny argument against doing so. So, but they are insane, which is really funny. So, I should not compare myself to madmen because they are insane. Yeah, right.

[00:36:43] I think it's intentionally funny on the cards part.

[00:36:47] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah. So, it's like as if Poe just took the ironical side, the skeptical side and, and... You know, played it out, right? And we sort of left the rational side behind a little bit. [00:37:00] And imagine another interlocutor who's questioning his sanity, right? But from the, yeah, occupying the madness, yeah.

[00:37:09] **Henrik Nielson:** Right, right, exactly. Um, and then I think that also Descartes adds something to my understanding of post text. Uh, because, uh, Descartes then goes on to find... Famously, one firm ground, one thing that cannot be cast into doubt. He doesn't, he doesn't, in the first minute, in the meditation on first philosophy, say kogito ergo sum.

[00:37:33] He says, I am, I exist, so not I think, therefore I am, which he says in another text. But even so, the point is the same here in Descartes. That there's one thing, that even if he, even if he's deceived by the senses, even if he's tricked by a demon, Even if he's sleeping . Yeah. There's still someone being perceived, someone sleeping someone.

[00:37:53] Right. Right. Uh, and, and then, and then Decart famously builds everything up again from, from, from, from, from that point. Right. [00:38:00] And, and I think what, what, what PO does and what Decartes let me see about Poe. That is that, that, that, that Poe pulls the rock from under that that point and says, it, it, it's, it's not even true it or it doesn't even have to be true.

[00:38:13] That, that we can find any, any firm ground in, in any kind of. Uh, thinking, uh, self or subjectivity, uh, because, like he says, I wanted to rid myself of the I forever. Uh, so, so, so it seems that the possibility of deception comes to even include that, that point of departure in, in the, in the thinking, uh, subject.

[00:38:35] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Great. Okay. Yeah. I mean, I think too, also, if we go, there's another. Maybe dimension of this, if we go to the sort of, you know, ways in which we think about what Descartes, you know, the cogito, or the I am, I exist, you know, this is the ground, um, it's, and it's the consciousness of that, right, I'm [00:39:00] aware that I exist, right, um, and then that, that becomes sort of, uh, The basis for kind of a mind body split, right?

[00:39:10] So, you know, and the mind gets privileged and all that, right? But there's a way in which, I think, um, if we have a telltale heart, right? And the beating of the heart sort of takes over everything here. It takes over the mind, right, the misperception of what the body is doing, or if we say it's actually, you know, the character narrator's own heart that, that's beating so loud that, you know, um, that's, there's, Poe in a way, you could read the story as Poe, um, sort of, um, you know, Running against the idea of a mind body split, right?

[00:39:53] We've got the body and the mind are so interconnected here, and we see it enacted in a way in this [00:40:00] story.

[00:40:02] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah, I think that's a fantastic reading. Yeah, so it kind of questions the mind body duality. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I think that's great. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:40:13] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Um, yeah. Okay. Yeah. Uh, so, um, maybe we could, uh, talk a little bit, a few more of , uh, kind of, um, neurological things.

[00:40:23] Um, so we, um, you know, we've already talked a lot about, um, um. Well, we started to talk about the unreliability, um, uh, and that's very much, you know, connected to what we've been saying about the senses, right? Can we trust our eyes? Can we trust our ears? Um, um, and so on. But, um, maybe we could, uh, say a little bit more about, um, about the kinds of unreliability that we have here, um, because, I mean, if we have, [00:41:00] if we go with the standard reading, right, then we would be focusing on, uh, he's actually, um, He's accurately reporting most things.

[00:41:11] He's accurately reporting that he did, you know, carefully calculate this and carry out this murder, um, but then, you know, the unreliability would be his interpreting of that and his evaluating of that and so on. But if we go with the idea that there's some kind of a suicide wish here, um, and there, there is no old man, um, it's all about his relationship to himself, then it becomes even more radically sort of unreliable because...

[00:41:41] There's no, you know, the reporting, um, comes into question. Uh, all right. So I don't know if you wanna, you know, ex extend those thoughts at all,

[00:41:53] **Henrik Nielson:** or No, but I, I think that's, that's, uh, that's very, very accurate and, uh, and, and, and very good, good points. Yeah, exactly. [00:42:00] Be because, because one reading obviously is to say that, so he wants to prove that he's not mad.

[00:42:04] But saying that, carefully dismembering a corpse, itself kind of attests to the unreliability of that, trying to disprove of madness. And then Poe clearly does that with him, but Poe is very subtle and plays with many sorts of unreliability. And like you said, another kind of unreliability would be if he actually accurately reports about the events.

[00:42:34] Exactly in the way he perceives of them, like exactly as he thinks things are, but that then as readers, we have to construct as maybe the policeman had to, that how he perceives of the world is entirely unreliable. And so, so that then two kinds of unreliability clashes with each other. And let's remember that this is a hundred years before, more than a hundred years [00:43:00] before anyone even talks about the possibility that a character on Radar, when Booth comes along a hundred years later.

[00:43:06] So it's very, very subtle, subtly done by Poe to create multiple kinds of unreliability for readers to detect and discuss. Yeah,

[00:43:17] **Jim Phelan:** yeah, yeah. And I think too, I mean, if we, if we're going to sort of keep Going with the idea that, um, Poe gives us multiple, you know, readings, um, or certainly multiple options for plausible readings.

[00:43:31] Then there's a way in which, um, anyway, if we think rhetorically, that somehow the, um, Poe's relationship to us, to his audience, becomes sort of even more prominent, right? In a way the, the story, the character narration, and so on, becomes a, a kind of, um, A device, um, you know, by which he can, uh, you know, [00:44:00] sort of take us through our, our processing of the story and that, you know, in our relationship to him, all right, well, what's Pogue doing now?

[00:44:09] What is, what does he want me to think, uh, as a result of this, you know, and, and that, that, that layering the thing, right? That's... Uh, yeah,

[00:44:20] **Henrik Nielson:** I think that that is exactly right. And I think one of the things that, uh, that entails is that, that the reader becomes like, like in the meditations, the reader can kind of stay detached from, from, from the questions of doubt and madness and, and kind of listen or read.

[00:44:40] But, but here the reader becomes kind of trapped, trapped in madness and, and, and several, uh, things about the construction, I think, uh, contributes to that. And one thing is, is, uh, the way Poe... Uh, not untypical at all for him construct this frame narrative where the reader begins at a, at a distance to the events, [00:45:00] but then in the end, uh, we, we are trapped in the middle, in the middle of the mad events, uh, themselves.

[00:45:06] And, and we never, we never come, come back to the frame. And I imagine if there was like a writer, writer's course or something, 1. 0, it would say, you cannot do that. You have to make sure you return to the frame, but, but Paul, it seems very intentionally stops the reader in this. Prisoner of Madness, uh, in which the character himself is.

[00:45:26] Is, uh, yeah. Impressive.

[00:45:28] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. And that connects, I think, to the point you were making before about the time, right. And how the time of the telling and the time of the toll start to merge at the end. And, and the, as the character narrator re immerses himself in that, that moment when he screams, you know, uh, villains, uh, assemble no more and so on.

[00:45:49] And, and so as he's reimbursed and we're following them. We're there too, um, and then we, but then we could take this, the, [00:46:00] we take one more step and say, all right, well, you know, why is Po doing that? Or was it, you know, what's the, what's the point? Right. And go back to a lot of the other things we were saying.

[00:46:10] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:46:13] **Henrik Nielson:** Um, good. Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Because, because I, I think another device. Uh, like kind of, uh, engaging the reader, immersing the reader, trapping the reader in this meditation of madness is that the reader, him or herself, experiences sense deception because in a sense I mean, I'm all about sense deceptions, so it's about one sense, the sense of hearing telling you one thing and then another sense telling you, Oh, but it's ambiguous or it could be several different things.

[00:46:49] And the first common we talked about was it was about the visual sense that I've seen connected, connected to the eye. And I think. That it's not a coincidence that towards the end, we, [00:47:00] we seem to find another homonym connected exactly to the second of the two senses involved in, in, in, in homonyms, uh, uh, going from that of seeing to that of, of hearing, because it seems like in the end when, when, when the character narrator screams, uh, dissemble no more, tear off the pegs, hear, hear, and obviously in the story it's H E R E, H E R E, Then it seems to me that if we go the other way round from, from seeing to hearing, then we could very easily hear those words as, as what, what they scream to us, H E A R, here, here.

[00:47:36] So listen, listen to this. So, so, so if that is the case, that's something we cannot, we cannot find by, by looking at it, by using our, our visual perception. Uh, but we can kind of get at by, by, by going beyond that sense deception and listening to it and hearing to it, hearing the telltale heart telling, uh, then we are ourselves, uh, not at all [00:48:00] detached from sense deception, but, but, but right in the middle of it, uh, in the end of the story.

[00:48:04] So it seems to me that we're trapped partly because we never returned to the frame and partly because we are part of that sense deception involved in the two homonyms. Concerning, respectively, seeing and

[00:48:16] **Jim Phelan:** hearing. Yeah, yeah, no, great. And maybe just one more wrinkle on that is the way in which there's a kind of, um, you know, the play with voice, right?

[00:48:27] So, we have character narrator, you know, speaking, um... Um, and describing external events, uh, uh, defending himself, um, from being mad and so on, right? Um, and so we have kind of the voice of the, of the narrator, but then as he goes and he's re immersing himself in the events. He starts to, um, you know, tell us what he's thinking, right?

[00:48:53] We have a kind of access to, uh, an internal voice, right? And then at the very end, [00:49:00] uh, we have, in the re immersion, we have his, um, you know, speaking voice, uh, emerging. And that's where we get the hear, hear, right? So that, that kind of, uh, You know, following all the voices and then sort of the eruption in this, you know, spontaneous overflow of powerful confession or whatever we would call it.

[00:49:24] And that makes, given everything he's doing with the sense of hearing, right, that play of voices also seems like a great. You know, uh, element of, of the way he's bringing things to this, this climax.

[00:49:40] **Henrik Nielson:** I think that, I think that, that's a fantastic point. And I think it fits really well with, with, like, almost everything else we've said.

[00:49:47] Because, because, if you're right, and I think you definitely are about that, then it also means that at that point, at the end, Finally, the reader is the interlocutor because for the first time we hear his direct voice speaking to [00:50:00] us. So again, we kind of trapped it in into that situation. Yeah, so I think that's a good

[00:50:04] **Jim Phelan:** point.

[00:50:04] Yeah. Yeah, good. All right. Well, I think we're coming to the end. But one thing I know that we're both interested and we haven't explicitly discussed, which is, uh, the fictionality here, right? So, you know, this is generic fiction, a short story, and Poe, you know, one of the famous, um, early practitioners of it, and, and so on.

[00:50:26] Um, so what is, what is, you know, thinking about fictionality do for, uh, the story or for what we've been saying about it? Uh, what are your thoughts?

[00:50:38] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah, yeah, I mean, I think you can talk about fictionality on two levels, even if just briefly on both levels. So one level is that, in a sense, we know as readers that what we encounter here is fiction, and that allows us...

[00:50:53] To take pleasure in something that would be horrific in real life. Okay, right, yeah. And that's [00:51:00] quite fundamental and maybe not very subtle, but even so, it's part of the experience. And I

[00:51:06] **Jim Phelan:** think actually quite profound, right? I mean, that we're in this zone where we're licensed for the exploration of the horror and so on.

[00:51:14] And we don't have to worry about direct, you know, real world consequences, you know. Right.

[00:51:22] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah, yeah. Right. But I'm following up on that. I think A lot of the cia, at least I take in the text, I think many, many PE people take in text is you, you distinguish between components like the thematic and the mimetic and, and and the synthetic component.

[00:51:36] Yeah. The synthetic having to do with the, the constructed ness Right. Of, of, of the narrative. And, and I think a great pressure for me is to, to enjoy also the synthetic component. Yeah. Ofhow pool. Uh, very subtly, very creatively placed with, uh, framing, unreliability, construction, voices, time, [00:52:00] all within a page span of like four pages.

[00:52:03] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. So there's this kind of aesthetic dimension to, to, to a fiction that we, you know, um, that, that is part of the pleasure. Um, and even if the, you know, things being depicted are... Unpleasant or, um, horrific. Yeah.

[00:52:22] **Henrik Nielson:** Yeah. Right. Yeah. And then the second level I want to really briefly mention about fictionality is That if there's anything to the reading, I suggest being possible that it's not really profoundly about a homicide, but more about a madman being deceived by incest and kind of swallowed up by madness.

[00:52:41] Then one could ask, why hasn't any previous readings focused on that? It seems to me that so many details point us in that direction as at least one possible direction. And I think technology plays in on another level because we have been so [00:53:00] used to up until recently as narrative theorists to kind of assume that real world Um, um, conditions would apply also to fictional narratives.

[00:53:11] And obviously, if this was a real police report, we couldn't kind of make, make, make that reading. So, so, so, so that reading or the possibility of that reading hinges on acknowledging the fictionality as, as the, the all, uh, encompassing, uh, framework, uh, and rhetoric. of the narrative itself.

[00:53:32] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, that's great.

[00:53:35] Well, um, that could be a good note to end on, but is there anything else that you were hoping we'd get to that we

[00:53:42] **Henrik Nielson:** didn't? Maybe just one final sentence I want to mention is that um,

[00:53:52] Again and again. Uh, like I said, the eye is referred to to in the singular and, and also it, it, it is mentioned that he had the eye of a [00:54:00] vulture. Mm-Hmm. And that, that is one of the sentences which Griswolds changes completely. So, so in Griswold's person, that sentences changed to one of his eyes in the pleural.

[00:54:09] One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture. So it's made into a comparison instead. So, so just one final meditation on what it means to, to say that he had the eye of a vulture where cannot help but thinking that. that any reader of fiction will think so. So what does it mean to, to, to, to be looked upon by, by the eye of a vulture?

[00:54:28] And, and, and, and, and we, we would know that. The vulture in fiction I is, is a creature who, who, who looks upon the dead or the dying or the corpses. Right, right, right. So, so already saying that I'm looking into the, i vulture entails a, a feeling of of being yourself already either dead, dead or dying on

[00:54:46] **Jim Phelan:** the way.

[00:54:47] Right? Yeah. Or

[00:54:48] **Henrik Nielson:** almost the corps. So, so, so I think that, that, that kind of, you could say that the eye of the vulture is the mirror of the dead. And that is what the character narrator conveys, but also what the reader [00:55:00] faces, that we cannot in this narrative stay kind of detached from, but what we are ourselves looking in the mirror of the dead, and thus kind of being swallowed up within a frame of madness and death, and I think Fo does that extremely efficiently and subtly.

[00:55:21] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, right. No, that's not. I like the way that you do that because it takes us back again to Poe and his Sensibility and you know what he what it's like to be reading Poe and giving ourselves over to him. All right. Well, great Well, thank you so much Henrik. This was a lot of fun, and I think our listeners will enjoy it So I also wanted thank our listeners and say, uh, we're happy to get feedback, which you can send to us at an email, projectnarrative@osu.edu

[00:55:53] Um, or you can, um, post the messages to our [00:56:00] Facebook page, um, or to our Twitter account, which is @PNOhioState. I also want to say you can find more than 20 additional episodes of the podcast on the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. Thank you again for listening.