LAMAR UNIVERSITY

Lesson 8: Summary of Critical Reading/Thinking Insights and Ideas

Edgar Allan Poe

A work of the macabre concerns itself with the grisly details of death. It is a subject that pervades much of Poe's work. What symbols of death can you find in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart?" Consider the beetles in the wall. And what about the old man's eye? What does it remind the narrator of? What does that particular animal act as the harbinger of? Notice that when the old man sat up in bed he gave a "groan of mortal terror". There is also the manner in which the narrator disposes of the old man's body. It's a graphic act described in horrifying detail.

How should you react when reading this piece? What response is Poe seeking to elicit from you? Horror? Dread? Disgust? Terror? All of these are valid responses to the story. Also look at who the narrator is. Poe places you within the mind of a madman, although he claims to be otherwise. What is the effect upon readers when they are privy to the inner workings of the insane? Might you be disgusted yet fascinated at the same time?

The story starts out as an argument by the narrator. He is trying to convince the reader that he is not insane. After proclaiming his plan to kill the old man, the narrator says, "You fancy me mad". But he is ready with his counter-argument.

> "Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!".

His claim is that he wasn't a raving lunatic; he was in fact calm, collected, and above all, careful. But what logical reason does he have to kill the old man? None. He is simply vexed by his eye. He says himself that he holds no ill will against the old man. In fact, when he began looking in on the old man he could not muster the nerve to kill him because the eye was always closed.

Poe believed that a story could only be written after the author had decided what emotional response or effect he wanted to elicit from the reader. This is Poe's idea of the "unity of effect." Once the effect has been selected, then all the parts of the story—plot, tone, setting, characters, theme—can be optimally chosen to achieve the desired effect. If Poe's effect is horror, can you see all the choices he made to achieve that effect? An insane narrator, an evil eye, a murder, a dismembered body, symbols of death, a beating heart only a madman can hear—all of these things inform Poe's choice of horror for the decided effect.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a vital piece of anti-slave literature in the 19th century, today it comes under fire for its sentimentalism, moralism, and stereotypical depictions of African Americans. To today's reader, the novel might be too starkly divided between good and evil. Stowe leaves no ambiguity about morality. And what of the sentimentalism? How does it sound to your 21st century ears? What examples can you find of sentimentalism in your reading? Think about the scene that shows Eliza crossing the Ohio River, escaping the slave trader. Think about the depictions of pure good and pure evil.

Remember, too, that the book is considered a jeremiad, a mode of public exhortation designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal. Through this critique, things can be changed, but if they are not, then society is due a downfall. Stowe's aim was to get people to act in opposition to slavery.

She aimed her novel squarely at white northern women, imbuing it with strong Christian overtones so she might better appeal to her audience. She even went so far to say that it was a "Christian book," and that God was the true author. She was only the one writing it down. Stowe was seeking to remove the antislavery argument from the public sphere and bring it down into the domestic arena, the home front.

Unfortunately, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often credited with furthering several racial stereotypes of African Americans. Sam is portrayed as lazy and carefree. Uncle Tom is the simple and pious negro who is ultimately concerned with the souls of his slave masters. Eliza is drawn as the beautiful and tragic mulatto who is both the creation of and the victim of sexual abuse. What other examples of stereotypes are you able find in your reading?

But why use these stereotypes? Why not move beyond these laughable descriptions and get to the real humanity of these characters? Again, we must consider Stowe's audience. She was using these stereotypes known to her 19th century readers to present her characters in a human and positive way. In other words, it was the most humanity she could afford her characters for the time she in which was writing. She needed these recognizable stereotypes in order to sway her readers to take action.

Frederick Douglass

Emerson and Thoreau celebrate the self, the individual, and the experiences that define us. But this concept doesn't quite work for Douglass. In your selected readings, notice how Douglass reflects upon the lack of knowledge that is so harmful to the slave. Slavery is a construct that removes all vestiges of the self. He has no knowledge of his birth, no knowledge of his father, and very little connection with his mother. How is Douglass supposed to know himself? What experiences has he had that inform him of who he is? Also, consider this: Emerson and Thoreau were safely removed from social brutality; does Douglass' life point to a flaw in the Transcendental ideal of finding the Self?

And what of the self of the slave holders? Were they not just as corrupted by the institution of slavery as their charges were? Douglass speaks about the masters fathering children with their female slaves. "The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife". Therefore, he is forced to sell his own children because that's the way the system works, and if he doesn't, "he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother...and ply the gory lash to his naked back". The cruelty here is a crushing and soul changing thing.

Several slave narratives that existed before Douglass' were ghost-written. But we can be assured that Douglass was the only writer for his tome. The detail is too vivid, and his work is imbued with the unmistakable individuality of his own style. Also, remember that Douglass was a well traveled and very practiced speaker of tremendous eloquence. This same eloquence is evident in his written work.

Finally, how does Douglass address religion? He sees the religion of the south as cruelty. It is a convenient mask that is used to hide the terrible acts committed against slaves in the name of God. But it's not that Douglass believes all religion is bad; it is simply misused or misapplied. Christianity in America often falls short by ignoring the basic humanity of slaves and allowing the institution of slavery to stand.