



THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONFLICT THROUGH PLOT IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE TELL-TALE HEART*

Kezia Meily Nicharisa S^{1*}, Aprilia Anzani², Eunike Anastasya Manurung³,
Nurhayati Purba⁴

¹⁻⁴ Department of English Language and Literature, Fakultas Sastra, Universitas
Methodist Indonesia, Medan

*Penulis Korespondensi: keziameily42@gmail.com , apriliaanizani5@gmail.com ,
eunikemanurung13@gmail.com, nurhayatipurba07@gmail.com

Abstract. *This study analyzes the development of conflict through plot structure in The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe. The research aims to identify the types of conflict presented in the story and explain how the plot contributes to the progression of these conflicts. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method using the short story as the primary data source. The analysis is based on Freytag's Pyramid Theory to examine plot stages such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, and Stanton's Conflict Theory to classify conflicts into internal and external types. The findings reveal that internal psychological conflict dominates the narrative, reflected in the narrator's obsession, fear, guilt, and paranoia, while external conflict appears between the narrator, the old man, and the police. The plot structure gradually intensifies these conflicts at each stage, culminating in the narrator's confession and psychological collapse. The interaction between plot and conflict strengthens narrative tension and reinforces the theme of madness. Therefore, plot and conflict function interdependently in shaping the psychological and structural development of the story.*

Keywords: *plot, conflict, Freytag's Pyramid, psychological conflict, Edgar Allan Poe*

1. INTRODUCTION

Plot is a fundamental structural element in literary works because it organizes events into a coherent sequence and shapes the reader's emotional engagement. Through plot, a narrative develops tension, directs character movement, and builds thematic meaning. Gustav Freytag (1863) conceptualizes plot as a five-stage structure consisting of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. This model illustrates how narrative tension is gradually intensified and eventually resolved. Complementing this structural view, Robert Stanton (1965) argues that conflict is the core element of fiction because it generates struggle and motivates characters' actions. Conflict may appear internally, within a character's psychological state, or externally, between characters or between a character and external forces. Thus, plot and conflict are inseparable components: plot provides the structural framework, while conflict supplies emotional and dramatic substance.

The interaction between these elements is clearly represented in *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe. The story centers on an unnamed narrator who insists on his sanity while describing the murder of an old man. The narrative progression reveals

escalating psychological instability, particularly manifested in guilt and paranoia. Internal conflict dominates the narrator's consciousness, while external conflict emerges through his relationship with the old man and later with the police officers. The tension intensifies systematically from the exposition to the climax, especially when the narrator believes he hears the dead man's heart beating beneath the floor. This progression demonstrates how plot structure functions as a mechanism that intensifies conflict and shapes the reader's perception of madness.

Previous studies tend to focus on either psychological analysis or structural analysis independently. Some emphasize the narrator's mental disturbance, interpreting the story as a representation of psychological disorder. Others analyze the plot stages without deeply examining how each stage contributes to the development of conflict. However, limited research integrates both perspectives to examine how structural progression directly shapes and strengthens internal and external conflicts. This gap indicates the need for a more comprehensive analysis that connects narrative structure and conflict development in a unified framework.

Based on this background, the problems of this study are formulated as follows:

1. What types of conflict are presented in the story?
2. How does the plot structure contribute to the development of these conflicts?

In line with these problems, this study aims (1) to identify the forms of internal and external conflict in the story, particularly guilt, paranoia, and interpersonal confrontation, and (2) to analyze how each stage of the plot, based on Freytag's structural model, supports and intensifies those conflicts. The scope of this study is limited to the analysis of plot and conflict within *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Other intrinsic elements are discussed only insofar as they relate directly to conflict development.

Theoretically, this study contributes to literary discourse by demonstrating that structural and psychological approaches should not be separated in narrative analysis. Practically, it assists students and researchers in understanding how narrative structure functions as a systematic device to construct emotional tension and character complexity. Through this integrated perspective, the story can be appreciated not only as a gothic

horror narrative but also as a carefully organized exploration of guilt, fear, and psychological instability.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to examine the development of conflict through plot structure in *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the data consist of words, narrative expressions, and textual elements rather than numerical data. The research focuses on interpreting intrinsic literary elements, particularly plot and conflict, within the framework of structural and formal analysis.

The primary data source of this study is the short story *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The data include narrative passages, dialogues, monologues, and descriptive segments that reflect stages of plot development and forms of conflict. The unit of analysis consists of sentences and paragraphs that indicate exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, as well as textual evidence that reveals internal and external conflicts.

Data collection was conducted through close reading and note-taking techniques. The researcher repeatedly read the text to identify structural stages based on the theory of Gustav Freytag (1863). Simultaneously, expressions indicating psychological tension and interpersonal confrontation were classified according to the conflict theory proposed by Robert Stanton (1965). After identifying relevant excerpts, the data were categorized into two main classifications: (1) internal conflict, which includes guilt, fear, anxiety, and paranoia; and (2) external conflict, which includes confrontation between the narrator and the old man as well as between the narrator and the police.

The data analysis procedure involved several systematic steps. First, the narrative was divided into structural stages following Freytag's Pyramid: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Second, each stage was examined to determine the type of conflict that emerges and develops within it. Third, the interaction between plot progression and conflict intensification was interpreted to reveal how narrative structure functions as a mechanism of psychological tension. The findings were then interpreted

descriptively to answer the research questions and to explain the integrated relationship between structural development and conflict dynamics.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Types of Conflict in The Tell-Tale Heart

Based on the conflict classification proposed by Robert Stanton (1965), the conflicts found in *The Tell-Tale Heart* can be divided into two primary types: internal conflict and external conflict. These two forms of conflict are closely interconnected and function together to construct the narrative tension of the story.

Internal conflict appears as a psychological struggle within the narrator's consciousness and becomes the central driving force of the narrative. The narrator's repeated insistence on his sanity at the beginning of the story paradoxically reveals his mental instability. His obsession with the old man's "vulture eye" is not based on rational cause but emerges from irrational fear and uncontrollable anxiety. This obsession gradually dominates his thoughts and shapes his perception of reality. The narrator convinces himself that eliminating the eye will free him from his fear, which illustrates how deeply the psychological conflict controls his reasoning.

However, the internal conflict does not disappear after the murder is committed. Instead, it intensifies and becomes more destructive. The narrator experiences overwhelming guilt and paranoia, symbolized by his hallucination of the old man's beating heart beneath the floorboards. This imagined sound represents his conscience and demonstrates his inability to escape the psychological consequences of his crime. Ultimately, the narrator confesses not because he is proven guilty, but because his internal conflict becomes unbearable. This confirms that the true center of conflict in the story lies within the narrator's own mind.

In addition to internal conflict, the story also presents external conflict. The first external conflict occurs between the narrator and the old man. Although the old man does not actively oppose the narrator, the narrator perceives him, specifically his eye as a threat that must be eliminated. This creates a one-sided interpersonal conflict that culminates in murder. The second external conflict arises when the police officers arrive to investigate the situation. Their presence generates tension and fear of exposure, even though they

initially show no suspicion. Thus, the narrative presents both psychological (internal) and interpersonal (external) conflicts that are inseparable in shaping the overall meaning of the story.

The Development of Conflict through Plot

The development of conflict in *The Tell-Tale Heart* is closely related to the plot structure formulated by Gustav Freytag (1863). Through the stages of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, the plot systematically intensifies both internal and external conflicts.

- **Exposition**

In the exposition, the narrator introduces himself and immediately attempts to prove his sanity. At this stage, the conflict is primarily internal, existing within his consciousness rather than through direct confrontation with others. His explanation of the old man's eye reveals the beginning of psychological tension. The contradiction between his claim of rationality and his irrational obsession highlights his unstable mental condition.

Although no physical violence occurs in this stage, the psychological tension is already strong. The exposition establishes that the root of conflict originates in the narrator's disturbed perception. By presenting the narrator's irrational fear at the beginning, the story lays the foundation for the transformation of internal conflict into external action.

- **Rising Action**

The rising action depicts the narrator's repeated nightly visits to observe the old man secretly. These actions significantly increase tension and demonstrate the gradual growth of conflict. Internally, the narrator struggles between his desire to act and his fear of being discovered. His anxiety intensifies as he becomes more obsessed with executing his plan.

Simultaneously, external conflict begins to emerge. Although the old man remains unaware of the threat, the narrator increasingly perceives him as an obstacle that must be

removed. The imbalance in awareness emphasizes that the conflict is driven by the narrator's distorted imagination rather than real opposition. Through suspense and repetition, the rising action transforms psychological instability into imminent violent action.

- **Climax**

The climax occurs when the narrator murders the old man. This moment represents the highest point of tension in the narrative. The external conflict reaches its peak through direct confrontation and violence. The narrator eliminates the old man, believing that this act will resolve his fear.

At the same time, the internal conflict also reaches its most critical point. The narrator's obsession and fear completely overpower his moral judgment. Although he expects relief after committing the crime, this event instead confirms his psychological collapse. As the turning point of the narrative, the climax demonstrates how plot progression leads conflict to its highest intensity before shifting toward consequences.

- **Falling Action**

During the falling action, the narrator hides the body and initially feels confident about his success. At this moment, the external conflict appears resolved. However, this sense of control is temporary. The arrival of the police introduces renewed external tension, as their presence creates fear of exposure.

More importantly, the internal conflict resurfaces with greater intensity. The narrator begins to hear the imagined heartbeat, which symbolizes guilt and paranoia. Although the police remain calm and do not accuse him, his psychological instability worsens. This stage reveals that the internal conflict is stronger than the external one and cannot be suppressed through physical action.

- **Resolution**

The resolution occurs when the narrator confesses his crime to the police. This confession marks the conclusion of both internal and external conflicts. Internally, the narrator can no longer endure the overwhelming guilt symbolized by the beating heart. Externally, the conflict with the police ends when the truth is revealed.

According to Freytag's structure, the resolution provides closure to the narrative. In this story, it emphasizes that guilt and madness inevitably lead to self-destruction. The narrator's confession demonstrates that psychological conflict ultimately defeats his attempt to maintain control. Thus, the plot completes the cycle of tension by bringing both forms of conflict to their final outcome.

Discussion Related to the Research Problems

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that the story presents two dominant types of conflict: internal conflict in the form of psychological struggle and external conflict involving other characters. The internal conflict functions as the primary driving force of the narrative, while the external conflict serves as its visible manifestation.

Furthermore, the plot plays a crucial role in developing these conflicts through its structured stages. Each stage contributes to the emergence, escalation, peak, and resolution of tension. The exposition introduces psychological instability, the rising action intensifies obsession, the climax unites internal and external struggles, the falling action highlights guilt, and the resolution confirms psychological collapse.

Therefore, this chapter answers the research problems stated in Chapter I by identifying the types of conflict found in the story and explaining how the plot structure systematically develops those conflicts. The strong interdependence between plot and conflict reinforces the psychological depth and thematic intensity of *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted in the previous section, it can be concluded that *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe presents two dominant types of conflict: internal conflict and external conflict. The internal conflict appears as a psychological struggle within the narrator, manifested through obsession, fear, guilt, and paranoia. This internal tension becomes the central driving force of the narrative and reflects the narrator's gradual psychological deterioration. Meanwhile, the external conflict emerges in the narrator's relationship with the old man and later with the police officers. These external

tensions are closely connected to and motivated by the narrator's distorted perception and unstable mental condition.

The study further confirms that plot structure plays a crucial role in developing and intensifying these conflicts. Through the application of Gustav Freytag's structural model, it is evident that each stage of the plot systematically contributes to the progression of conflict. The exposition introduces the narrator's psychological instability and establishes the foundation of internal conflict. The rising action intensifies both internal and emerging external tensions through repetitive and obsessive behavior. The climax represents the peak of conflict in the act of murder, where internal obsession transforms into violent action. The falling action reveals the psychological consequences of the crime, particularly through guilt symbolized by the imagined heartbeat. Finally, the resolution demonstrates that the narrator cannot escape his conscience, as internal conflict ultimately forces him to confess.

Therefore, the study answers the research problems by identifying the types of conflict presented in the story and explaining how the plot structure develops those conflicts. The interdependence between plot and conflict strengthens the psychological tension and reinforces the theme of madness. The narrative structure functions not merely as a sequence of events but as a systematic mechanism that constructs emotional intensity and character collapse.

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