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Euthanasia and Reincarnation: A Reader - Response Reading of Poe's "The Tell- Tale Heart"

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Abstract :This paper sheds light on the reader as a crucial side of the triangle which includes: the reader, the text, and the author. Firstly, I highlight the contours of the reader – response theory by the prominent theorist Wolfgang Iser who stresses the role of the reader to fill in the gaps in a literary text. Secondly, I argue that Edgar Allan Poe's nineteenth century short story, *The Tell- Tale Heart*, is a story of euthanasia and reincarnation, rather than a story of a crime committed by a schizophrenic caregiver/a servant who suffers from OCD, as established in earlier research articles. Hence, I prove the inexhaustibility of the text as highlighted by Iser. I do so by drawing on the dynamics of Iser's theory, filling in the gaps about the characters of the old man and the care giver, shedding light on the physical and psychological medicine as well as referring to the societal and cultural norms at this time. In the light of Iser's theory, I refer to particular personal experiences that highlight the "how" of reaching a particular understanding of a text is possible. Euthanasia is a very thorny issue because it touches on religion, beliefs, cultural norms, medicine, philosophy, law, and more. Hence, this issue proves to be an interdisciplinary one where euthanasia intersects with reincarnation and the short story.

Key words: reader – response theory, Edgar Allan Poe, Wolfgang Iser, euthanasia, reincarnation

1. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe's work has always been legendary and has received much critical acclaim. His most famous works include: the poems "To Helen" (1831), "The Raven" (1845), and "Annabel Lee" (1849); the short stories "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Tell -Tale Heart" (1843), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846). Poe has been celebrated for his gothic stories and tales of horror. There have been many studies and research papers on Poe's "The Tell- Tale Heart" with respect to the gothic and macabre elements (Yusuf, 2018) as well as the anticipation of existential despair of human beings as an in-depth meaning of the gothic in the short story (Studniarz, 2021). This short story has also been studied as a manifestation of psychological and mental illnesses: the narrator of the short story has been referred to as a paranoid, schizophrenic, and an OCD character (Zimmerman, 1992; Yusuf, 2018; Abu Jwaid and Sasa, 2022).

Through the lens of one of the most prominent reader - response theorists, namely Wolfgang Iser who sheds light on the dynamics of the reader literary response, I analyse "The Tell- Tale Heart". Iser (1972) has explained that the reader fills in the blanks/ gaps of the text, and he insists that each text can have different readings by different readers and that "no reading can ever exhaust the full potential"

of a text because each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his/ her own way. When a reader makes his/ her decision to fill in the gaps his/ her own way, the reader “implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text” (p.285). It is the goal of this paper to prove the inexhaustibility of the text as an aspect of Iser’s theory even to the oldest texts written more than two hundred years ago. Hence, I have chosen Poe’s “Tell- Tale Heart”, a supposedly exhausted text to provide a new reading which has not been presented earlier according to my knowledge. “The Tell – Tale Heart” is a story of euthanasia and reincarnation, a cultural action, rather than a story of mental illness. It is crucial, before providing such a reading, to assert that euthanasia is ethically, morally, religiously and legally prohibited. Moreover, perpetrators of euthanasia are penalized for their violations. However, this paper inspects the thorny issue of euthanasia in a cultural context which existed more than two centuries ago.

2. READER RESPONSE THEORY: WOLFGANG ISER

Lobo (2013) explains that reader- response criticism is almost one hundred years old, and all reader – response critics agree on analysing both text and reader’s response to reach meaning, but they differ in the way/the how a meaning of a text is acquired. Selden et al. (2005) explain that according to Iser, it is the critic’s task to explain the effects of the text on the reader rather than explain the text as an object because it is impossible, as an example, for an atheist to read one of Wordsworth’s Lucy’s Poems which starts with: A slumber did my spirit seal, and be affected the same as a Christian.

Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007) is a leading literary theoretician and co- founder with Hans Robert Jauss of the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics. Iser is a prominent advocator of the Reception Theory in contemporary literary field and the core of his theory mainly highlights the phenomenological approach of the reader when dealing with a text; this approach emphasizes the perceiver and perception process over the text. This phenomenological approach of Iser’s Reception Theory can be summarized in four main tenets: the polarity of the literary work; the “gaps” which the readers fill by accessing their own “experiences” and by creating a “virtual dimension” for the “unwritten parts” of the text; the role of the memory of whatever the reader has read or experienced to present itself to help the reader create a particular meaning of the text; and the cultural norms from which the text has emerged (Iser, 1972, p.279, p.284, p.292).

According to Wolfgang Iser (1972), there are two poles of the literary work: the artistic, which refers to the text created by the author; and the aesthetic, which refers to the realization of the reader of the text; this polarity necessitates that the literary work can neither be identical with the text nor with the reader’s realization of the text, but must lie halfway between the two and this is what brings the literary work into existence. Iser (1972) explains that the literary text activates the readers’ faculties and helps them to recreate of the text a “virtual dimension” which is a creative product of both: the imagination of the reader and the text as the readers tend to fill in “the gaps” by accessing their own experiences (p.284).

Iser’s theory highlights the importance of the reader’s experiences and asserts that the literary text acts as “a kind of mirror” which reflects his/ her own disposition; however, this disposition/ realization of the text will be a different one from his/ her own experience, which is paradoxical enough because the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself/herself in order to realize a reality of the text different from his own. In the mission of realizing the reality of the text, Iser (1972) highlights, the

reader is actively “providing the unwritten part” of the text and “supplying all the missing links”; the reader “must think in terms of experiences different from his own” so he can “truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him” (p. 286, 287).

When the reader creates “the unwritten part” or “the virtual dimension”, they rely on their memory which is significant in Iser’s theory. Lobo (2013) explains the role of memory in Iser’s theory: the impact of memories on the reader is a psychological matter as whatever is stored in the reader’s memory can influence a reading as the reader draws connections. Hence, the connections made between “the reader’s real memories” and the events occurring in a text which summoned those memories are “sole proof of how the text and the reader interact in a creative process” to present a meaning of the text (Lobo, 2013, p.25).

Iser (1972) explains that the basic element of the reading process is when readers refer back to their own preconceptions which come to the surface during the act of interpretation of the text, and another element of the reading process is how selective the reading process is; this proves how the text is infinitely richer than any of the individual interpretations because it allows for multiple interpretations. In fact, the reader himself/herself does not absorb a short text in a single moment and that is why his/ her first reading allows for an interpretation that might be different from the second reading. Moreover, the second reading may also be enriched because of a new impression of the text or the reader’s change of circumstances. On a second reading, Iser (1972) elaborates, the reader notices things he had missed during the first reading experience. This is scarcely surprising because there has been a modification of the reader’s experience of the text in the second reading. Hence, the process of anticipation has been modified as the reader has already gained an experience during the first reading. Therefore, he approaches the text for the second time with a new experience.

The repertoire of the text, Iser (1978) points out, is the familiar ground which allows for a communication to start between the text and the reader; this repertoire can be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social/ historical/cultural norms from which the text has developed. Celik (2021) explains this important part of Iser’s theory by stating that when the reader comes in contact with a work of a past – epoch, the historical gap between the text and reader does not blow away the spark of innovation because the reader becomes an observer who must “reconstruct the social and literary systems against which the work in question is constructed” (p.68).

3. EUTHANASIA

Dying is inevitable, and it is the final chapter in the story of one’s life. The manner of dying has been a huge discussion for more than four hundred years; should a dying person be actively put to death if he/ she is suffering from a terminal illness or severe old age symptoms or should a dying person be left to undergo a palliative death till his natural hour arrives? This section explains the meaning of euthanasia over centuries until the present and how it has been a controversial issue in the past up till the present.

Euthanasia, as a meaning and application, has developed over hundreds of years, giving different meanings over time. Vanderpool (2015) explains that the history of palliative care originated over 400 years ago and has continued until the present moment; in 1605, Sir Francis Bacon coined the Greek term ‘euthanasia’ meaning good death and held it the responsibility of physicians to palliate the pangs

of dying people so they die with greater tranquility, and ever since Bacon summoned this legacy, it has not stopped, and continued to be promoted in the medical literature through the 1880s. However, after that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there were two meanings of euthanasia: Bacon's traditional meaning and a new meaning of euthanasia which belongs to the present – day definition of euthanasia / the modern sense of euthanasia which is “the practice of physicians actively ending the lives of terminally ill persons”, which has not been what Bacon called for. According to the early meaning and application of Euthanasia, caregivers devoted their time and efforts to one goal, Bacon's proclamation in fact, namely “peaceful dying” or the equivalent other terms to fulfill the same goal of good death, such as “natural dying”, “medically managing death”, “dying with dignity”, and “care for the dying” (Vanderpool, 2015, p. 4).

The fundamental features of medical palliation were the fruits of Bacon's proclamation for good death, and it is a fact that making death good and easy, as understood and called for by Bacon, became a medical imperative by 1770 in one of the distinguished medical schools at that time (Vanderpool, 2015). Bacon has explained that easing physical anguish and providing personal attention to patients without deceiving the patients with fatal diseases into a fake hope of recovery were prerequisites so that they can depart life in spiritual peace. Hence, Bacon has shed light on the importance of the complementary roles of: physicians, clergymen, and family members to achieve “calm dying” when death is not feared and his ideas became a legacy put into practice by many as Thomas Browne, Theophile Bonet, Samuel Bard, and John Gregory (Vanderpool, 2015, p. 10, p. 22).

Between 1826 and 1854, a number of detailed essays were written on palliative care and how to attend to dying patients: One of the most crucial essays was originally lectured by Carl Friedrich Heinrich Marx (CFH Marx). Entitled “Medical Euthanasia,” it was published in 1826. Another impressive essay is a handwritten one by Hugh Noble, entitled “Euthanasia” which was a requirement for his medical degree from the University of Edinburgh in 1854. Both essays highlight that euthanasia refers to good dying or peaceful dying, the meaning as already coined by Francis Bacon, and both denounced the idea of a physician- imposing death on a dying person. Narcotics were used to treat various diseases, primarily to alleviate the pain of dying patients and improve their sleep. Drugs containing cyanide, opium, and extracts of the plant belladonna were specifically utilized to relieve cancer pain. (Vanderpool, 2015, p. 39, p.41).

Related to the topic of palliative attending to the dying persons, John Ferriar opposed the use of stimulants for dying persons, and CFH Marx highlighted the senselessness of applying useless medicines that will cause dying people to shrink in bitterness, and he also refused dangerous therapeutic measures that will not benefit an incurable patient (Vanderpool, 2015, p. 42). Clark (2016) explains that the majority of physicians in England and the United States in the 1870s and 1880s were opponents of intentional killing of dying patients because they regraded such an act as immoral and dangerous to both the individual and the society. The euthanasia debate in today's meaning goes back as early as 1870 and was sparked essentially as a “philosophical” discussion by a schoolteacher named Samuel Williams, who submitted a paper to the Birmingham Philosophical Society, and it was followed by numerous articles, but medical practitioners did not take part in these discussions (Clark, 2016, p. 26).

Dr. William Munk insisted on using the literal and traditional meaning of the word euthanasia and chose to ignore any other meanings attached to the word “at a time when other meanings were beginning to be attached to it, ...”; moreover, Dr. Munk’s *Euthanasia* (1887) was considered a manual for end of life medical care, which had a huge influence on medicine and nursing “on both sides of the Atlantic”; it was the fruit of more than forty years of experience in medical field. (Clark, 2016, p.11, p.17). The modern understanding of euthanasia as a deliberate medical intervention to end life emerged in the late nineteenth century but was not widely accepted. At the beginning of the twentieth century, euthanasia was controversial and continued to be so. Until the present, euthanasia is not legally and/or religiously accepted worldwide except for some countries such as Switzerland and some individuals around the world. Euthanasia remains controversial. The movie “Me Before You” based on Jojo Moyes’s 2012 novel by the same title has caused protests and fury in many states of the United States as well as many countries around the world. Will Traynor, a wealthy privileged young man, played by Sam Claflin, is willing to travel to Switzerland for assisted suicide after a road accident that left him quadriplegic. Louisa Clark, played by Emilia Clarke, plays the role of his caretaker and does her best to dissuade him from this decision. However, the film and the novel end in the hero committing euthanasia according to his own will. The fury against the movie and the novel has arisen from the unacceptable message that problems of the disabled people are solved by assisted dying (Gilbey, 2016).

On the other hand, modern proponents of assisted suicide claim that general prohibitions against assisted suicide violate the Establishment Clause; Rubin (2010) argues that assisted suicide is prohibited on a religious base, which should not be the criterion for a decision, and he clarifies his point of view by asserting that assisted suicide is distinguished from murder in the same sense that sex is distinguished from rape because there is the individual’s consent. In the light of “The Tell- Tale Heart”, the manner of dying is highlighted and studied in section 5 in this paper.

4. REINCARNATION AND THE VULTURE

Reincarnation, as derived from Latin, literally means “to take on the flesh again,” but as civilizations developed, various religions evolved, among which are the eastern religions, which are characterised by being more philosophical and tending to embrace reincarnation; however, the eastern religions like Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism have also differed in their concepts of rebirth or reincarnation (Nagaraj et al., 2013, p. 171). Nagaraj et al. (2013) explain that reincarnation, as a subject, has appeared in the tradition of India and Greece from the 6th century BC and it means that we leave one life and then go into another life in the form of human, animal or plant according to one’s moral acts in the previous life. In Hinduism, reincarnation is governed by ‘karma’, which may be good or bad according to one’s deeds, and it is because of a person’s desire to be born again to enjoy a body, desiring higher forms of happiness that the cycle of rebirth goes on. Only when a person realizes that all the desires for the pleasures of the world do not count and that the lasting happiness or peace is what really matters, then the cycle of rebirth ceases and a person is said to have achieved liberation and spends eternity in heaven.

The “vulture eye” plays a huge role in Poe’s short story because it is the catalyst that motivates the caregiver to end the old man’s life as argued in section 5 of this paper. The vulture is regarded as a unique creature in some cultures but as a bad

omen in others. Singh (2023) insights the reader about how vultures have been condemned for years as harbingers of death in many cultures, and how these birds are much misunderstood even if they might not be deemed aesthetically pleasing to the human eye; vultures are very intelligent and play a crucial role in servicing ecosystems and controlling diseases because they are unparalleled in their ability, if a group of vultures work, to strip a carcass of a cow, for example, in twenty minutes, leaving no meat to rot and no chance for pathogens in the carrion to thrive because of the powerful acid in their stomach. Hence, they prove to be a dead – end for many pathogens, unlike other scavengers which tend to become carriers of disease because vulture stomach acid is so powerful that they are effectively a dead-end for many harmful pathogens, which means they don't in turn become carriers of disease as in species like rats or feral dogs which coexist closely with humans. With the demise in the number of vultures, millions of carcasses are left to rot, leading to a huge risk of the spreading of diseases as they are the main removers of carrion in India; it is because of the unprecedented decline in numbers, serious measures are being taken nowadays to ensure their safety as in The Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (APVC) in India, 2020-2025, which confesses the dilemma of the effect of diclofenac, which was found toxic to vultures, and the different strategies to conserve the different species of vultures with the hope of restoring environmental balance (Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change [MoEFCC], 2020).

The vulture has been a marvellous mentor for human beings. Prehistoric people used red ochre in their habits and rituals, especially in relation to those in relation to birth and death, mimicking the vulture's habit of bathing in red ochre mud, which has proved to be of a solid sanitary reason; modern experiments have proved that red ochre in sunlight produces chemical species which can kill viruses and bacteria. Hence, it is the vulture which has taught people to use red ochre for human rituals and everyday life for more than 100,000 years, and it is even under present discussion to use this health strategy in a modern way to help in fighting antibiotics-resistant bacteria in hospitals (Tributsch, 2016). Vultures are not only mentors and eco- friends, but are also deeply related to incarnation and stand as a crucial gear in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Chapple (2017) explains that according to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, we have taken birth countless times, but the mechanics of reincarnation are complex although these traditions agree that karma or actions from the past determine one's present and future states. In Hinduism, the residues of action are released during cremation and go through a period of transition that includes smoke ascendance, followed by descendance with rain into the earth, entrance into food and semen, and finally integration into a new life via reproduction. In Buddhism, the unresolved desires travel from forty-nine days during the funerary period before finding a new birth while in Jainism, karma flows straight from death into a new womb, destined by a person's actions before the end of life.

Diniari (2020) explains that a medical psychological research has investigated and proved reincarnation as a belief and wisdom in some communities to be a supportive therapy in the elderly with depression; the compensation for the loss of a family member in the spirit of a new born baby in the family provides a relief and lessens the sadness for the lost family member because the new born baby is believed to be a reincarnation or a rebirth of one of the lost members. In Indonesia, Balinese Hindu family perform the ritual of “nunas baos”, which means connecting with spirits

via supernatural figures to find out whose spirit “has manifested” in the baby and it is usually the reincarnation of a dead family member (Diniari, 2020, p. 77).

5. EUTHANASIA AND REINCARNATION IN POE’S “THE TELL - TALE HEART”

One of the main values of literature is its “very indeterminacy” which permits readers to transcend “the restriction of time and written word” and give a chance to all people of all ages and backgrounds to enter other worlds (Newton, 1997, p.198, p. 199). The personality of the old man has not been given much critical attention; the caregiver has received the lion’s share although there is a lot to be discussed about the personality of the old man. As readers, we know that he is an old man, living with his caregiver alone in the house. My presumption that he is not in very good health is a valid one because of the deterioration of eyesight in one of his eyes. He also lies still in bed for an hour rather than have the potential to check who entered his room. WHO explains that old adults over sixty suffer from stressors that are more common in later life as: significant ongoing loss in capacities, a decline in functional ability, chronic pain and some old people suffer from dementia and depression.

Dr. Simon (1951) explains that old age can be a problem characterized by frustration and the want of adjustment because as the individual grows, the aged undergo “progressive impairment of the regulatory homeostatic mechanisms” as well as an impairment in the adaptive capacity of the individual to handle “psychological stress”; the retirement ceremony for him tends to a “funeral ceremony”, so the old person may react to his/her decreasing abilities by withdrawal and his feelings and complaints of fatigue, weakness and general feelings of ill health become “an unconscious means of gaining sympathy and attention” (p. 74, p. 75). Hence, I assume we are talking about a character who most probably suffers from all complaints of old age and must have managed to extract feelings of sympathy and attention from the caregiver, particularly that the old man is loved by the caregiver who asserts: “I loved the old man” (Poe, 1843). The old man’s eye is described as “with a film over it” (Poe, 1843) which is understandable since hearing and vision are two of the most important sensory functions mostly affected by aging which deprive the old person of a large share of pleasures in life and causes the old person to become even more isolated (Simon, 1950). Feelings of loneliness and isolation do not result only from the physical challenges; in fact, the social and cultural dictates of the society aggravate these feelings and life becomes tasteless for old people.

In terms of culture and society, Dr. Simon (1951) explains that with increasing age, the children become adults, get married and leave the home; this is because the large family unit made up of three generations: grandparents, parents, and children has become obsolete. Moreover, it has become desirable for the young adults to separate from their parents after marriage, treat the old parents with a “patronizing courtesy” and put into action a “newer attitude” when parenting their children that does not allow old people to parent their grandchildren which deprives old people from such a pleasure. (p.75). The old man in “The Tell – Tale” is either a widower or a divorcee. This in itself adds another stressor besides the moving out of his children. Elderly couples stay in independent household and when widowed, the widowed person chooses to accept living with children, or institutional homes, albeit they tend to stay in their own houses “to which they are sentimentally attached” rather than relocate themselves or engage in conflicts with younger family members (Simon,

1950, p.75, p. 76). In 1873, there were only 120 hospitals, from which the dying was denied access to, and most people died at home because dying was viewed as a social and spiritual event; however, the culture of dying in Europe and America during the long nineteenth century shifted from the spiritual considerations of the process of dying to the goal of relieving physical pain as a priority to religious observance (Clark, 2016, p.10).

It is true that illness can be a means of gaining sympathy, as mentioned earlier, but it “sometimes provides a method of aggressive domination of the situation” by arousing guilt in one of the children (Simon, 1951, p. 77). In “The Tell -Tale Heart”, the old man arouses guilt in the caregiver and dominates the situation aggressively by calling for mercy killing through the vulture eye. In section 4 of this paper, it has been highlighted that vultures are referred to as mentors, friends and icons of reincarnation. Hence, feelings of sympathy triggered inside the caregiver by the usual deteriorating health of the old man and his understandable loneliness at his own home with none of his children or relatives; and the cultural background of the caregiver that might have believed in euthanasia as well as incarnation as means of showing love are the motives for killing the old man as I fill in the gaps of the story.

Newton (1997) comments on the gaps of a story, asserting the crucial role they play in giving the reader a chance to “build his own bridges” with the text; these indeterminate sections/ gaps of literary texts are crucial for an aesthetic response because the indeterminate element of literary prose is the “switch” that activates the reader in using his own ideas to reach the intention of the text (p. 197, p. 198). As a reader, it is my opinion that the caregiver/ servant/ attendant who was in charge of the old man practised euthanasia according to the Middle Age style. Dr. Munk (1887) explains that there was a prevalent opinion among nurses and servants during the nineteenth century that a person whose death “is lingering” can not leave life unless he/ she is dragged on the floor as a “penitential act”; this was a custom in the Middle Ages and did not wholly stop on behalf of the servants if left to care for the old or sick unattended by the relatives or friends of the sick (Munk 1887 p.92- 95).

The old man in Poe’s short story was unattended by any member of the family or any friend and had an “evil eye” that needed purgation, not because the old man was evil, but because every person on earth must have committed a sin even if he is counted as a good person. Hence, the old man is dragged to the floor and strangled in a manner very similar to that of the Middle Ages and practiced by some servants. “When the patient is supposed by the nurse to be nearly in a dying state, they withdrew the pillows and bolster from beneath the head, sometimes with such violence as to throw the head back and to add greatly to the difficulty of respiration” and “the avowed motive for this barbarity is a desire to put the patient out of pain...” (Munk, 1887, p. 94). Vanderpool (2015) asserts that it was a common belief among nurses and servants at that time that death can be lingering because the patient remains on bed, and it was inevitable to drag him on a mattress on the floor to help him quit life; this was practiced in France, Germany and America. That is why, I believe, the old man is killed this way; there is no other motive – no hatred, no burglary, and no vengeance. Mere euthanasia! The unfaded custom of the Middle Ages! This is how I fill in the gaps of the text. It is a fact that no tale “can ever be told in its entirety” and it is “only through inevitable omissions” that a story gains its “dynamism”; that is why whenever the flow of the tale is interrupted, readers are “led

off in unexpected directions” and are given the opportunity to “fill in the gaps” left by the text (Iser, 1972, p. 285).

“In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him.” (Poe, 1843). The servant’s attitude is an echo of the malpractices during the nineteenth century by servants. The eminent English physician James Mackness, fifty years later after the publication of Dr. Ferriar’s essay, confirmed the accuracy and asserted the credibility of these practices which were well known to everyone, and held it the duty of the medical man to “check carefully into the cases of dying patients whom he comes across and observes if they are abandoned to the care of those whose officious folly or unfeeling indifference are likely to distress the last moments” of the dying patients instead of ensuring a real peaceful death (Vanderpool, 2015, p. 39). Had the old man been entrusted in the care of a more mature or educated caregiver, the old man’s life could have been spared.

In this short story, the vulture eye demands an invitation on behalf of the old man for the caregiver to kill him; thus, in the mind of the caregiver, he is simply helping him and freeing him. Every time the old man is sleeping, the vulture eye is not triggering the same invitation of mercy killing/ euthanasia. However, once he opens his eye, the invitation is persistent once more. “I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him” (Poe, 1843). For seven days, the caregiver could not finish the task because he always found the eye closed. The caregiver admits: “for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye”. On the eighth day, the old man opens his eye and the caregiver executes euthanasia, freeing the old man of the shackles of old age. Rubin (2010) argues that assisted suicide should be distinguished from murder because there is consent. In this story, the consent came from the vulture eye that stands for friendship, mentorship, and reincarnation. If a mentor asks for a plea/ request, wouldn’t it be the duty of the student to enforce it/ put it into action? This is exactly what the caretaker does, particularly when euthanasia was the mindset of many caregivers/ nurses in the nineteenth century, as Munk (1887) explains. It was practised in the absence of family members.

5.2 Euthanasia and Reincarnation: An Application of the Dynamics of Iser’s theory

Building on my experiences and memory with old relatives, acquaintances, and professors, I have come to understand more about their struggles of old age. Comprehensible are their occasional utterances about death as a kind of mercy from Allah and a relief from continuous pains, struggles and confinement in their beds. I have understood the caregiver’s action as his own concept of euthanasia as practised by some caregivers in the nineteenth century. I have also dealt with a considerable number of care givers and do understand their different mentalities, arising from different backgrounds and their own concepts and follies, interpreting doctors’ orders. Referring to my memories, when I was an undergraduate, a very dear professor, Professor H.H., who might not prefer me to disclose her name, taught me Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. She stated that she loved the idea of technological advancement that would allow a person to lead a healthy life with no problems and die at sixty, rather than live a very long life and suffer from problems of old age. At that time, I wondered why would someone on earth prefer dying at sixty rather than live longer even if in a weak health. However, this has all changed now because I understand better: chronic diseases, boredom, tiredness, sickness, depression,

loneliness and the whole list that comes with old age and its shackles make life miserable for the old. This professor must have witnessed an old acquaintance/relative suffering because of old age exactly as I have witnessed them now and understand better. This memory from the past resonates with my present experiences with old relatives and their foolish caregivers. It triggered my first reading of the text; this is “the how” of I have seen euthanasia/ deliberate ending of life out of mercy as the motive of killing the old man.

In my second reading of the short story, I had what Iser refers to as “a new light” or an enrichment of an interpretation of the text because “certain aspects of the text will assume a significance we did not attach to them on a first reading” (Iser, 1972, p.285). My previous readings about incarnation and the believed roles of vultures in this process have triggered my concentration on the ‘vulture’ as a contextual symbol. My second reading of the short story has enriched my first reading as suggested by Iser’s theory and allowed for an extended interpretation of the text. “It is a common enough experience for a person to say that on a second reading he noticed things he had missed when he read the book for the first time...” (Iser, 1972, p.286). It is through the perspective of the caregiver during the nineteenth century that euthanasia was rendered a relief to the old man. Moreover, the belief in incarnation which allows any dead person to come back to earth in any form has been advocated by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism as Chapple (2017) explains. Nagaraj et al. (2013) conclude that each religion and each spiritual teacher has a different view of the mechanism of rebirth. “Truth” is beyond the reach of anyone’s mind and for the time being a human mind’s concepts that fit into his/ her belief become the absolute truth. Hence, in the caregiver’s mind, he was putting in practice his own beliefs/ truth. The caregiver asserts that the old man’s heart beats stop, but he rehearses them later; this might be interpreted as reincarnation/ rebirth of the old man who dies but is reincarnated in the form of any living creature.

I am neither a believer in euthanasia nor in reincarnation, but I am a believer in the pangs, suffering, and dilemma of old age. I am also an inspector of the cultural norms from which the text has emerged. Hence, my personal experience and memories have mirrored my reading of the text; yet, the text has forced me to think in terms of experiences different from my own as Iser has explained in his theory. Accordingly, the meaning of the literary text lies halfway between the artistic pole created by the author and the aesthetic pole created by the reader as Iser has confirmed in his theory.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has allowed a new reading for Poe’s short story “The Tell – Tale Heart”; it is in memory of the old, delicate, vanished hands and their kind, dedicated, blessed souls – May Allah rest them all in peace! The reader -response theory continues to be an amazing lens for literature exploration and allows for addressing the creativity of both the writer and the reader; the outcome is a significant duet. The phenomenological approach of Iser has signified the reader’s experience in his/her reading of a text and how the literary text lies halfway between the writer’s pole and the reader’s pole. As a reader, I have found my reflection in the mirror of the text, yet thought of experiences different from my own and even speculated cultures different from mine, providing an innovative reading, which has been an adventure indeed as Iser has explained.

In the light of Iser's theory, I have offered one reading in a spectrum of possible readings to Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"; this short story is a story of euthanasia and reincarnation, rather than a story of a crime committed by a psychologically-ill caregiver/ servant. Hence, Iser's judgement about the inexhaustibility of the text has proven correct. Iser's four main tenets in the Reception Theory have contributed to my reading of the text. My experiences, memory, and reference to cultural norms of the text have filled-in the gaps in Poe's text, creating a constructive dimension that bridges the two poles of the text. This, indeed, proves the existence of two poles (the artistic pole and the aesthetic pole) within each literary work, and highlights the possibility of an on-going filling of the gaps of any artistic text.

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