

Before You Read

The Tell-Tale Heart

MEET EDGAR ALLAN POE



I was never *really* insane, except on occasions where my heart was touched," Edgar Allan Poe once wrote to his mother-in-law. During his life, Poe was known for writing about mysterious forces, wicked crimes, and death. Unfortunately, his life was as sad as those of most of his characters. He was poor for most of his life. His mother died when he was two, and he was disowned by his foster father. In addition, Poe's wife died when she was only twenty-four.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 and died in 1849. "The Tell-Tale Heart" was first published in Pioneer magazine in January 1843.

READING FOCUS

Do we see ourselves as others see us?

FreeWrite

How is the way people view themselves different from the way others view them? Freewrite your answer.

Setting a Purpose

Read this short story to find out what the narrator thinks about himself and the acts he has committed.

BUILDING BACKGROUND

Did You Know? Poe spent most of his life writing poetry, beginning as a teenager and sacrificing material comforts for twenty years so that he could concentrate on his art. The success he finally found with his poem "The Raven" didn't improve his financial status. The poem was reprinted and parodied everywhere, and Poe was invited to tour the country lecturing and reading his work. However, he was paid less than \$15 for the poem, and lecturing paid barely enough to support him. Three years after "The Raven" came out, Poe still could not afford to keep his house warm during his wife's final battle with tuberculosis.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

acute (ə kūt') *adj.* sharp and strong or intense; p. 835
vex (veks) *v.* to disturb, annoy, or anger, especially by some small, repeated action; p. 836
stifled (stī' fəld) *adj.* held back; smothered; p. 837
wane (wān) *v.* to draw to a close; approach an end; p. 839
audacity (ō das' ə tē) *n.* reckless boldness; daring; p. 840
singularly (sing' gyə lər lē) *adv.* unusually or remarkably, extraordinarily; p. 841
vehemently (vē' ə mənt lē) *adv.* strongly; intensely; passionately; p. 841
hypocritical (hip' ə krit' i kəl) *adj.* pretending to be what one is not; fake; insincere; p. 841

The Tell-Tale Heart



Edgar Allan Poe ~

TRUE!—NERVOUS—VERY, VERY DREADFULLY NERVOUS I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled 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? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

Vocabulary

acute (ə kūt') *adj.* sharp and strong or intense

**ACTIVE
READING
MODEL**

ADJUST SPEED

What is unusual about the punctuation? What does it suggest about the narrator?

The Tell-Tale Heart

CLARIFY

What is the narrator trying to tell you?

VISUALIZE

Try to picture the movements of this man as he enters the room.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. 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! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a 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 for ever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. 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 dissimulation¹ 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! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I 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. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—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—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. 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 the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound² 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. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night, had I *felt* the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity.³ I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think

1. *Dissimulation* means "the hiding or disguising of one's true feelings and intentions."

2. Here, *profound* means "very thoughtful and wise."

3. *Sagacity* (sə gas' ə tē) is wisdom and good judgment.

Vocabulary

vex (vex) *v.* to disturb, annoy, or anger, especially by some small, repeated action

ACTIVE
READING
MODEL

that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as pitch with the 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 pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed, crying out—“Who’s there?”

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the mean time I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed, listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches⁴ in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the 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 welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. 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. He had been saying to himself—“It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor,” or “it is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.” Yes, he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions;⁵ but he had found all in vain. *All in vain*; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, 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—to *feel* the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice⁶

4. *Death watches* are beetles that bore into wood, especially of old houses and furniture. Some superstitious people believe that these insects’ ticking sounds foretell death.

5. *Suppositions* are things one assumes, or supposes, to be true.

6. A *crevice* (krev’ is) is a crack in or through something.

Vocabulary

stifled (stī’ fald) *adj.* held back; smothered

VISUALIZE

Imagine a movie scene showing the narrator’s entry into the old man’s room.

RESPOND

What effect does this very slow action have on you?



Hidden Room of 1,000 Horrors (The Tell-Tale Heart), 1963. Movie still.

Viewing the photograph: How does this photograph add to the horror of the story?

PREDICT

Based on the vivid description of the heartbeat, what do you think will happen?

in the lantern. 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 veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; 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 damned 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, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. 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 the 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. Meantime the hellish *tattoo*⁷ of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old

7. The heart was making a drumming or rapping sound. (This *tattoo*⁷ comes from a Dutch word; the other *tattoo*, a design on the skin, comes from the language of Tahiti, a Pacific island.)

man's terror *must* have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood 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. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then 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 wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He 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. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings.⁸ I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even *his*—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught 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—for what had I *now* to fear? 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; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed⁹ to search the premises.

8. The *scantlings* (more commonly called joists) are the boards that hold up the floor planks.

9. *Suavity* (swāv' ə tē) is a smooth, polite, gracious manner. The officers were appointed, or *deputed* (di pū' tid), by a superior officer. (This makes them deputies, in effect, although they probably have other official titles.)

Vocabulary

wane (wān) *v.* to draw to a close; approach an end

ACTIVE
READING
MODEL

ADJUST SPEED

How might you vary your reading rate in this passage? Why?

ACTIVE
READING
MODEL



Hidden Room of 1,000 Horrors (The Tell-Tale Heart), 1963. Movie still.

Viewing the photograph: What seems to be tormenting the man in this picture? Compare this realistic image with the illustration of the eye on page 835. Which image best helps you to visualize the story? Why?

PREDICT

What do you think may be indicated when the officers sit down?

I smiled—for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, 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 treasures, secure, undisturbed. 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, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed¹⁰ the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My *manner* had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted

10. Here, *reposed* means "lay dead."

Vocabulary

audacity (ô das' ə tē) *n.* reckless boldness; daring

singularly (sing' gyə lər lē) *adv.* unusually or remarkably; extraordinarily

of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct—it continued and 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.

No doubt I now grew *very* pale—but I talked more fluently,¹¹ 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. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations;¹² but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with 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—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—*louder!* And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew!*—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision!¹³ I could bear those *hypocritical* smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!*—

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble¹⁴ no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!”

11. To speak *fluently* is to do so smoothly and effortlessly.

12. *Trifles* are unimportant things. Bold, expressive gestures are *gesticulations*.

13. *Derision* is scornful mockery or ridicule.

14. Here, *dissemble* means “to disguise one’s true thoughts or feelings; act in an insincere way.”



Vocabulary

vehemently (vē' ə mənt lē) *adv.* strongly; intensely; passionately

hypocritical (hip' ə krit' i kəl) *adj.* pretending to be what one is not; fake; insincere

RESPOND

Imagine this scene being enacted as a movie. How might an audience respond?

Responding to Literature

PERSONAL RESPONSE

- ◆ Can you hear the beating of the dead man's heart as you finish the story? What incidents from the story stay in your mind?

Active Reading Response

- ◆ Which prediction did you make that was supported by evidence later in the story?

Analyzing Literature

RECALL

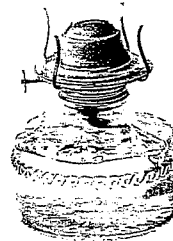
1. What reason does the narrator give for committing the murder?
2. What does the old man do when he hears the narrator at his bedroom door?
3. Why do the police come to the door?
4. What does the narrator hear while talking to the police officers in the victim's bedroom?

INTERPRET

5. What does the narrator want his audience to understand about him as he talks about his murder plans? Explain.
6. How does the narrator feel about frightening the old man? Support your answer with examples from the story.
7. How does the narrator react when the police first arrive? Why does he behave this way?
8. Why does the narrator confess to his crime?

EVALUATE AND CONNECT

9. Theme Connection How does the author make the narrator a convincing character? Is any of his behavior normal? Explain.
10. Who has the "tell-tale" heart in this story—the narrator or the old man? Defend your choice.



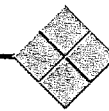
LITERARY ELEMENTS

Mood

The **mood** of a story is the emotional effect it has on a reader. The overall mood of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is one of anxiety and fear. One way Poe achieves this mood is through the rhythm of his language, which mimics a fast, irregular heartbeat. Poe's use of exclamation marks and dashes conveys agitation, as does the narrator's repetition of the word "nervous."

1. Find three other passages in the story in which punctuation and repetition help project a mood.
2. Find a description of the victim that supports the story's overall mood of anxiety and fear.

- See **Literary Terms Handbook**, p. R6.



Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

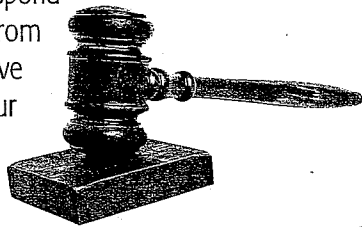


Unanswered Questions What questions do you still have about this story? With your group, discuss questions such as these: Is the narrator of the story insane, or is he just evil? How do you explain the power that the old man's eye and heartbeat had over the narrator? Why did the narrator continue to hear the old man's heartbeat after he was dead? Share your answers with the rest of the class.

Learning for Life



Presenting an Argument Imagine you are the narrator's defense attorney. Write an argument for why he should not be convicted of murder. As you write, anticipate and respond to counterarguments from people who may believe he is guilty. Deliver your argument to your classmates.



Writing About Literature



Suspenseful Scene Which scene from this story did you find most gripping or scary? Why did it affect you this way? Write a paragraph or two explaining your answer. Include details and examples from the story to support your answer.

Creative Writing



Police Report Imagine that you are one of the police officers called to the house after a neighbor heard a scream. What facts do you uncover? Write a police report about this case.

Reading Further



If you enjoyed this story, try
Look for Me by Moonlight by Mary Downing Hahn

Save your work for your portfolio.

Skill Minilesson

VOCABULARY • ANALOGIES

An **analogy** is a type of comparison that is based on the relationships between things or ideas. Analogies are often used on tests to measure how well you can figure things out and how good your vocabulary is. A test will not tell you what kind of relationship is shown by the first pair of words. You'll have to figure that out. Then you'll need to find another pair of words that could be used to illustrate the same relationship.

- For more about analogies, see **Communications Skills Handbook**, pp. R72–R73.

PRACTICE Complete each analogy.

- cramp : sharp :: ache :
 - brief
 - dull
 - sudden
 - slight
- loud : quiet :: stifled :
 - soft
 - ignored
 - released
 - touched
- knock : pound :: vex :
 - soothe
 - torture
 - scold
 - comfort
- taunt : scorn :: praise :
 - approval
 - complaint
 - disgust
 - care