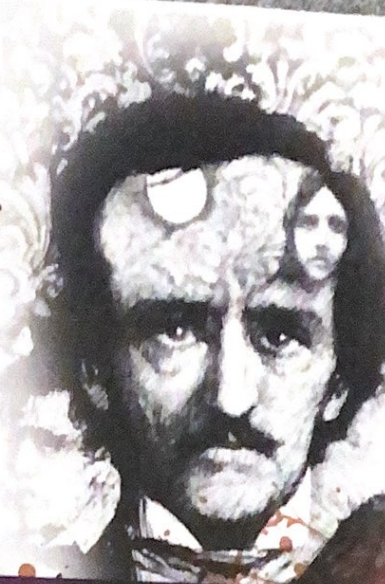


**Edgar Allan Poe** (1809–1849) was born in Boston to parents who were traveling actors. Orphaned by the time he was three, he moved to Virginia where friends of his family raised him. As a young man, Poe worked as a journalist while writing the stories and poems that would earn him the title “father of the modern mystery.” After his young wife died, Poe fell into despair. He passed away two years later. His dark and sometimes horrifying works perhaps mirror the darkness and sadness of his own short life.



# The Tell-Tale Heart

Short Story by Edgar Allan Poe

**SETTING A PURPOSE** As you read, pay attention to the way the narrator describes himself. What makes him unusual?

**T**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.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once **conceived**, it haunted me day and night. Object there  
 10 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 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.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen

**conceive**  
 (kən-sēv') v. When you *conceive* an idea, you think of it.

how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what  
20 foresight—with what dissimulation<sup>1</sup> 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  
30 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,  
40 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 profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

**vex**

(vēks) v. If you vex someone, you annoy that person.

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.<sup>2</sup> I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening  
50 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.

<sup>1</sup> **dissimulation** (dī-sīm'yə-lā'shən): a hiding of one's true feelings.

<sup>2</sup> **sagacity** (sə-gās'ī-tē): sound judgment.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man  
60 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 meantime 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 watches<sup>3</sup> 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 grief—oh, no!—it was the low, stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the  
70 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  
80 is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes, he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions; 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,  
90 very little crevice 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 full 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

**stifle**

(stī' fəl) *v.* If you stifle something, you smother it.

**crevice**

(krēv' ĩs) *n.* A crevice is a narrow crack.

<sup>3</sup> **death watches:** deathwatch beetles—insects that make a tapping sound with their heads.



or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

100 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<sup>4</sup> of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old 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  
120 into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant

<sup>4</sup> **hellish tattoo:** awful drumming.

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.

130 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.<sup>5</sup> I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even *his*—could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no  
140 blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

When I 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,<sup>6</sup> 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  
150 (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

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  
160 **audacity** of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

**audacity**

(ô-dās' ī-tē) *n.*

*Audacity* is shameless daring or boldness.

<sup>5</sup> **scantlings**: small wooden beams supporting the floor.

<sup>6</sup> **suavity** (swā'vī-tē): graceful politeness.

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

170 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. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations,<sup>7</sup> 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 observation of the men—but the noise steadily increased.

180 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?—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!** I could bear those

190 **hypocritical** smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! *louder!*—  
“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble<sup>8</sup> no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!”

#### vehemently

(vē'ə-mənt-lē) *adv.*  
If you do something *vehemently*, you do it with intense emotion.

#### derision

(dĭ-rĭzh'ən) *n.*  
*Derision* is jeering laughter or ridicule.

#### hypocritical

(hĭp'ə-krit'ĭ-kəl) *adj.*  
If someone is *hypocritical*, the person is false or deceptive.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** “The Tell-Tale Heart” is a well-known classic. With a partner, discuss what makes the story—and its narrator—so thought provoking. Cite specific evidence from the text to support your ideas.

<sup>7</sup> **gesticulations** (jĕ-stĭk'yə-lā'shəns): energetic gestures of the hands or arms.

<sup>8</sup> **dissemble**: pretend.

## Analyze Point of View

8.RL.2.6

**Point of view** is the method of narration used in a short story, novel, narrative poem, or work of nonfiction. In a story told from the **third-person point of view**, the **narrator**, or the voice that tells the story, is an outside observer. In a story told from **first-person point of view**, the narrator is a character in the story and uses the pronouns *I* and *me*.

Just as you can't believe everything everyone tells you, you can't always believe everything you learn from a first-person narrator. An **unreliable narrator** is a narrator whose assessment of events cannot be trusted for some reason—he or she might be purposefully lying, mentally unstable, or too young or unsophisticated to fully understand events. In order to determine whether or not a narrator is reliable, consider his or her actions, attitudes, and statements, and then decide whether he or she is generally trustworthy.

Do you think the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is reliable? Review the story and identify the lines that help you decide.

## Analyze Suspense

8.RL.2.6

**Suspense** is the sense of growing tension, fear, and excitement felt by the reader. When a story is suspenseful, the reader becomes increasingly curious about what will happen next. Writers use different techniques to create suspense in fiction. Notice these examples from "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Technique	Example
Describing a character's anxiety or fear	"... groan of mortal terror ... it was the low, stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe."
Using vivid words to describe dramatic sights, sounds, or feelings	"He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold."
Repeating words, phrases, or characters' actions	the actions the narrator repeated as he entered the old man's room each night

As you analyze "The Tell-Tale Heart," look for additional examples of each technique.

## Analyzing the Text

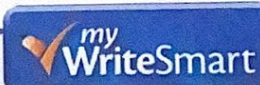
### Cite Text Evidence

Support your responses with evidence from the text.

- Infer** Does the narrator's opinion of himself in lines 1–16 make him seem more or less reliable? Explain your choice.
- Analyze** What prevents the narrator from killing the old man during the first seven nights? Explain how his inaction contributes to the suspense.
- Interpret** In what way does the author's repeated image of the "eye of a vulture" help to create suspense?
- Draw Conclusions** Reread lines 88–105. What do readers learn from this first-person narration about the narrator's subjective, or personal, experience?
- Analyze** In lines 151–160, the narrator makes his case to the police and thinks he has convinced them of his innocence. What happens next that leads the narrator to finally confess? Tell what this suggests about his mental state.
- Evaluate** Do you think the reader's ability to trust the narrator increases the suspense in this story? Explain your answer.

## Speaking and Listening

Working alone or with one or more partners, act out a scene from "The Tell-Tale Heart" that you consider especially suspenseful. Be prepared to identify the techniques or conventions that create suspense in the scene.



### PERFORMANCE TASK

**Writing Activity: Profile** Criminals sometimes undergo a psychiatric evaluation during which their mental health is reviewed by a psychologist. If the narrator of this story underwent such an evaluation, what might the mental health experts say about his state of mind? Based on details from the story, write a profile of the narrator by answering the following questions:

- What crime did he commit?
- What was his motive? Was he insane, enraged, seeking revenge, or something else?
- Do you predict that the narrator will take responsibility for his crimes? Why or why not?
- What evidence, based on the narrator's account of events, supports your theory?